

**WHY NASHVILLE AND
WHY NOW?**

Denny R. Burk

**DANVERS, NASHVILLE,
AND EARLY
COMPLEMENTARIANISM**

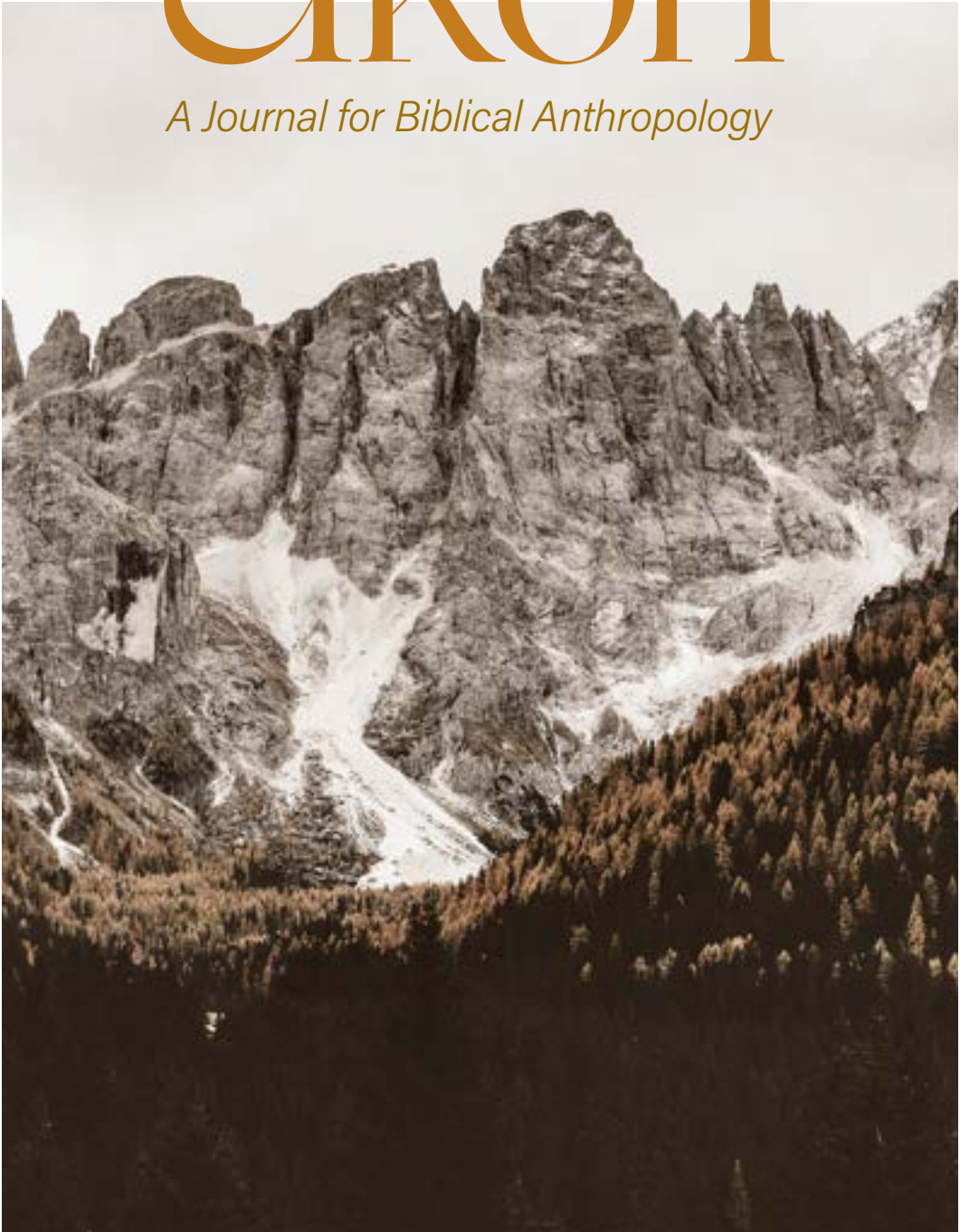
John Piper

**FIVE YEARS LATER:
REFLECTIONS ON THE
NASHVILLE STATEMENT**

Colin Smothers

eikon

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On the Nashville Statement



Five years ago this Fall, a group of evangelical leaders met in a conference room in Nashville to give a particular response to a particular moment. The sexual revolution had given birth to the LGBT revolution, and even in its nascency it was clear this movement was a new challenge not yet faced in the church's history.

World-renowned historian William Manchester had observed 30 years earlier that "the erasure of the distinctions between the sexes is not only the most striking issue of our time, it may be the most profound the race has ever confronted."¹ His commentary on this trend toward male-female interchangeability grew out of an observation of the societal effects of second-wave feminism. But how much more apt — and prescient — are his words in light of what the LGBT revolution has wrought: challenging the human race in

Colin J. Smothers
Eikon Executive Editor
Wichita, KS
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feigned conjugal interchangeability (LGB) and inter-personal interchangeability (T).

I was among those gathered in Nashville, and we were there with a particular burden in mind, as reflected in this paragraph from the statement's preface:

[The] secular spirit of our age presents a great challenge to the Christian church. Will the church of the Lord Jesus Christ lose her biblical conviction, clarity, and courage, and blend into the spirit of the age? Or will she hold fast to the word of life, draw courage from Jesus, and unashamedly proclaim his way as the way of life? Will she maintain her clear, counter-cultural witness to a world that seems bent on ruin?

We wanted to meet our moment with the truth of God's Word, to restate and recommit to what the church has always taught and believed about marriage, gender, and sexuality. We did so not only for the sake of our children, but also for the sake of our children's children, and their children — the generations who, if the Lord tarries, will read in the history books about this particular time and this particular challenge to the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Were there any faithful when the world claimed marriage is something other than a union between a man and a woman? Were there any faithful when the world said gender exists on a spectrum as a mere cultural reality, and not male and female as God made us from the beginning? Were there any faithful when the world asserted that a man could become a woman by self-declaratory fiat, in the face of his Maker, and the surgeons fell in line to confirm the lie? And all of it being sold down the river to our children?

We wanted to stand up, stand firm, and say, "We dissent, because we can do no other." And we wanted to do so primarily for the sake of the church, to help her stand firm in these trying days, to tell her to trust her Lord and his Word, that it is still good, true, and beautiful, as it will always be.

These past five years have only served to confirm the need for the Nashville Statement, as LGBT ideology has become more entrenched and more brazen. Not even a year had gone by before another movement, Revoice, was formed as a direct challenge to the Nashville Statement, especially Articles 7 and 10 with their errant notion of so-called "Gay Christianity." The intervening years have seen more churches and even whole denominations affirm homosexuality and transgenderism as good. And then there are the children. Several studies have noted a radical uptick in the number of trans-identifying youth in recent years, in some cases topping a 4000% increase. Adolescent girls are getting double mastectomies, young boys are being castrated, and thousands — perhaps millions — are being put on hormones and chemicals in an attempt to mimic the opposite sex, only to lead to certain infertility and lifelong unhappiness.

What is the church to do in such times? We are to recommit to the truth, and continue to make disciples of all nations, teaching them all that Jesus commanded — the whole counsel of God's Word. That is the aim of the Nashville Statement, and that is the aim of this issue of *Eikon*. To that end, we pray that we all would "Know that the LORD Himself is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves" (Ps. 100:3).

¹William Manchester, "A World Lit Only By Change," U.S. News & World Report (October 25, 1993), 6.

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DENNY R. BURK

Why Nashville and Why Now?

When I left the office of CBMW on the last Monday of August 2017, I did not yet know what we were about to unleash. It was the eve of the public release of the Nashville Statement. Three days earlier, we had convened a meeting of over 80 Christian leaders and scholars in Nashville, Tennessee to finalize a doctrinal statement concerning the Bible's teaching on sexuality and gender identity. We had three days to gather initial signatories before the statement's public release on Tuesday, August 29. We were elated about the impressive list of evangelical signatories who signed-on in those three days — J.I. Packer, R. C. Sproul, Jim Dobson, John

Piper, Albert Mohler, Kevin DeYoung, John MacArthur, Don Carson, Marvin Olasky, H. B. Charles, Rosaria Butterfield, Nancy Leigh DeMoss, and many more. It was a veritable who's who of evangelical leaders and scholars. We could hardly have been more pleased by the response from signatories on the eve of the public release.

And yet as I left the office that evening, I remained dubious about how much of an impact the statement would make. After all, when CBMW launched the Danvers Statement 30 years earlier, only one media outlet (*Christianity Today*) showed up to the press conference.¹ Why would anyone

¹Wayne Grudem, "Personal Reflections on the History of CBMW and the State of the Gender Debate," *The Journal for Biblical Manhood & Womanhood* 14, no. 1 (2009): 14.

pay attention to a doctrinal statement that simply proclaims what Christians everywhere have believed for the last 2,000 years about sexual morality? We never intended for the Nashville Statement to be a culture war document. We designed it to be a resource for churches and ministries who wanted a faithful articulation of the Bible's teaching on one of the most difficult and pressing challenges of our time. Would anyone pay attention to this? I wasn't sure that they would. So as I was leaving, I stopped in the doorway and said to the staff, "I hope someone will cover this. Maybe *Christianity Today* will pick it up?"²

Little did I know that — within the next few days — The Nashville Statement would be covered by news outlets from coast to coast and would be going viral online for days and weeks to come. The overwhelming response was provoked by the Mayor of Nashville, Megan Barry, who denounced the statement in a tweet: "The @CBMWorg's so-called 'Nashville Statement' is poorly named and does not represent the inclusive values of the city & people of Nashville." Those 22 words thrust the Nashville Statement into the national spotlight and under the scrutiny of mainstream media who tried to portray

the statement as a culture war artifact. They were wrong about that, but sadly the impression seemed to stick with many.

The New York Times ran an op-ed titled "The Nashville Statement Is an Attack on L.G.B.T. Christians."³ *The Washington Post* included a straight news piece by Katelyn Beatty suggesting that the impetus for the Nashville Statement was somehow connected to support for President Trump.⁴ *The New Republic* argued that "The Nashville Statement Is the Religious Right's Death Rattle" and that "Beneath an unequivocal stance against queer sexual orientation lies a deep insecurity about the Christian right's position in American politics."⁵ A number of celebrities piled on as well, denigrating the Nashville Statement and its authors as sexually repressed bigots acting out in the culture war.⁶

These reports were wildly inaccurate. Nevertheless, this coverage gave the impression that the point of the Nashville Statement was simply an effort by the religious right to whip up the culture war for political purposes. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Ironically, no news outlet reporting on The Nashville Statement ever asked me or the other principal drafter



for an interview. To this day, no reporter has asked me who the principal drafters even were, why we came together to draft it, who was in the room in Nashville versus who signed after the fact. If they had asked me, I would have told them that the narrative woven by the media is a gross distortion.⁷

I also would have told them about the drafters' real aims. The Nashville Statement was never intended as a culture-war document. It was intended as a resource for churches and ministries.⁸ It is not a manifesto to the world but a confession for the church. It stakes out no public policy positions. It advocates for no particular piece of legislation or political program. Rather, it was drafted by churchmen from a variety of evangelical traditions who aim to catechize

God's people about their place in the true story of the world. And fundamental to that storyline is our "personal and physical design as male and female." Those of us who drafted The Nashville Statement saw a need for the church to confess what it has always believed and to do so faithfully given the current challenges that she faces. We were hoping to produce a resource that could help with that.

The question before us five years hence is whether we achieved that aim. I think we did. Since 2017, more churches and Christian institutions than we can count have adopted the Nashville Statement in one way or another. In 2019, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America voted to commend the Nashville Statement

² The editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*, Mark Galli, wrote an opinion piece criticizing the Nashville Statement a couple months after its release. He complained that the statement lacked "broader participation" and excluded those who wish to identify as "gay Christians." See Mark Galli, "What To Do with Statements and Confessions," *Christianity Today* 61.9 (November 2017): 30. I responded to Galli's editorial in Denny Burk, "Responding to CT's editorial against the Nashville Statement," CBMW, October 30, 2017, <https://cbmw.org/2017/10/30/responding-to-cts-editorial-against-the-nashville-statement>.

³ Eliel Cruz, "The Nashville Statement Is an Attack on L.G.B.T. Christians," *The New York Times*, September 1, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/01/opinion/nashville-statement-lgbt-christians.html>.

⁴ Katelyn Beatty, "Why Even Conservative Evangelicals Are Unhappy with the Anti-LGBT Nashville Statement," *The Washington Post*, August 31, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/08/31/why-even-conservative-evangelicals-are-unhappy-with-the-anti-lgbt-nashville-statement/?utm_term=.eb0621670172.

⁵ Sarah Jones, "The Nashville Statement Is the Religious Right's Death Rattle," *The New Republic*, September 5, 2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/144679/nashville-statement-religious-rights-death-rattle>.

⁶ E.g., Denis Leary, <https://twitter.com/denisleary/status/902856244330889216>; Patton Oswalt, <https://twitter.com/pattonoswalt/status/902959400561676289>; Rachel Dratch, <https://twitter.com/TheRealDratch/status/902854366822064130>; Bradley Whitford, <https://twitter.com/BradleyWhitford/status/902772672836325382>; Marlee Matlin, <https://twitter.com/MarleeMatlin/status/902763238953279489>; Joy-Ann Reid, <https://twitter.com/JoyAnnReid/status/902778543255511041>.

⁷ I do not have space in this article to give a comprehensive account of how the Nashville Statement came about. So I will give a brief account of one part of it — the drafting process. I wrote the first draft of the Nashville Statement in early 2017. I sent the draft to Albert Mohler and John Piper for their feedback. Both of them replied that the draft was inadequate. Mohler suggested that the draft be re-written in the form of affirmations and denials. I produced a second draft in the form of affirmations and denials, and then shared it with Piper. Piper responded with a revision so substantial that he would have to be considered a co-author. His revision led to a protracted back-and-forth between the two of us over the theological details of the statement. Once we finally had a draft we both were happy with, I began circulating the draft privately and widely to other Christian leaders and theologians for their input and feedback, and the draft underwent further revision as a result of that feedback. Some of those offering feedback made it to the meeting in Nashville, and some of them didn't. One week before meeting in Nashville, we shared the draft with those signed up to attend the conference. All the attendees had a chance to offer feedback on the draft before arriving in Nashville. On the day before the meeting in Nashville, a small drafting committee composed primarily of CBMW council members weighed and incorporated feedback from conference attendees. By the time we began our meeting in Nashville, we had a draft that had been heavily vetted and edited. During debate and discussion time, some final changes were made. Finally, those attending the meeting voted overwhelmingly to approve the draft. There were not any "no" votes.

⁸ I elaborated these points in Denny Burk, "Keeping Christianity Weird: Why the Nashville Statement Matters," *The Hill*, September 3, 2017, <https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/religion/349019-keeping-christianity-weird-why-the-nashville-statement-on>.

as a “Biblically Faithful Declaration” and as “affirming these orthodox, historic truths.”⁹ The PCA adopted this measure as an answer to the Revoice conference, which had been hosted by a PCA church in the Missouri Presbytery. Also in 2019, the Southern Baptist Convention drafted and adopted a resolution “On Sexuality and Personal Identity” that made use of language from the Nashville Statement.¹⁰ In 2017, “The Board of Trustees of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary unanimously approved a recommendation to adopt ‘The Nashville Statement’ as an official part of the school’s confessional documents.”¹¹ The board at Reformed Theological Seminary approved Nashville as a standard for its board members.¹² Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary trustees unanimously adopted Nashville as a confessional standard in 2019, followed by the trustees at Southwestern

Baptist Theological Seminary in 2020.¹³ Cedarville University adopted Nashville among its clarifying documents, and Union University trustees adopted a unanimous resolution of “appreciation for the biblical clarity and genuine compassion of the Nashville Statement and applauded [President] Oliver and other members of the Union faculty who were among its initial signers.”¹⁴ Trustees at Southwest Baptist University voted to require its religion faculty to affirm the Nashville Statement.¹⁵ And the list goes on and on. It has been impossible to track all the churches who have adopted Nashville since those actions rarely make it into news reports, but we have been privy to anecdotal evidence that churches have used the statement widely as well.¹⁶ The institutional buy-in to the Nashville Statement has far exceeded our initial expectations over the last five years.¹⁷

⁹ Kate Shellnutt, “PCA Sides With the Nashville Statement Over Revoice’s Approach,” Christianity Today, June 28, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/june/pca-nashville-statement-lgbt-revoice-sbc-ecc-vote.html>. See also Overture 4 from the 2019 General Assembly of the PCA: <https://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Overture-4-Calvary-Nashville-Statement.pdf>.

¹⁰ Matt Damico, “News: SBC Resolution on Sexuality Influenced by Nashville Statement,” CBMW, June 14, 2019, <https://cbmw.org/2019/06/14/news-sbc-resolution-on-sexuality-influenced-by-nashville-statement/>.

¹¹ Andrew J. W. Smith, “Southern Seminary Trustees Vote to Adopt ‘The Nashville Statement’ as an Official Confessional Document,” News - SBTs, October 10, 2017, <https://news.sbt.edu/2017/10/10/southern-seminary-trustees-vote-adopt-nashville-statement-official-confessional-document/>.

¹² I was made aware of this action by the Chancellor of RTS.

¹³ T. Patrick Hudson, “Midwestern Seminary Trustees Adopt ‘Nashville Statement,’ Conduct Significant Business during Spring Meeting,” Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, April 11, 2019, <https://www.mbts.edu/2019/04/midwestern-seminary-trustees-adopt-nashville-statement-conduct-significant-business-during-spring-meeting/>; Alex Sibley, “Southwestern Seminary Will Move Forward ‘Stronger than Ever before,’ Greenway Tells Trustees - TEXAN Online,” Southern Baptist Texan, April 8, 2020, sec. SBC, <https://www.texanonline.net/articles/sbc/southwestern-seminary-will-move-forward-stronger-than-ever-before-greenway-tells-trustees/>.

¹⁴ “Trustees Mark 20th Anniversary of Union University Germantown,” Union University, September 8, 2017, <https://www.uu.edu/news/release.cfm?ID=2509>. I learned about the action by Cedarville trustees from the President of the university.

¹⁵ Brian Kaylor, “SBU Adds 3 Creedal Statements for Religion Professors,” Word & Way (blog), September 9, 2020, <https://wordandway.org/2020/09/09/sbu-adds-3-creedal-statements-for-religion-professors/>.

¹⁶ I have also seen reports about various Baptist state conventions adopting all or part of the Nashville Statement. E.g. Colin Smothers, “Arkansas Baptist State Convention Affirms Nashville Statement ‘without Equivocation,’” CBMW, December 6, 2017, <https://cbmw.org/2017/12/06/arkansas-baptist-state-convention-affirms-nashville-statement-without-equivocation/>.

¹⁷ There are many notable evangelicals who did not sign the Nashville Statement. Our aim, however, was never merely to collect a list of signatories. Our aim from the beginning was to effect institutional buy-in. We wanted to persuade Christian institutions to adopt the Nashville Statement (or something like it) as a part of their own confessional framework. The collection of signatures was merely a way to commend the statement to Christian institutions for their prayerful consideration and adoption.

On the five year anniversary of the Nashville Statement, the founder of Revoice Nate Collins called on endorsers to “repent” of their signing the Nashville Statement (see Nate Collins, Twitter post, August 29, 2022, 10:27 a.m., <https://twitter.com/NateCollins/status/1564258344994578433>). Collins’ call for repentance is both wrong on the merits and wrong about the relevance of signatories. Again, maintaining a list of signatories is not the point. Institutional buy-in is the point, and that continues apace. Since Collins’ call to repentance, 2 people have asked to have their names removed while 59 people have asked to have their names added. None of the “initial signatories” have asked to have their names removed since Collins’ call to repentance. I think this shows that signatories by and large still resonate with the biblical doctrines so clearly articulated in the Nashville Statement.

“We needed the Nashville Statement . . . within the evangelical movement, we are still not all on the same page when it comes to sexuality, marriage, and gender identity.”

We needed the Nashville Statement in 2017, and we still need it now. Even within the evangelical movement, we are still not all on the same page when it comes to sexuality, marriage, and gender identity. There are some within the evangelical movement who are surveying the situation and are trying to convince us that we can simply agree to disagree about the definition of marriage, the moral status of homosexuality, and gender identity. Some evangelicals will choose traditional views, and some will not. Our differences should not lead us to treat someone as outside the faith. But are they right when they make this claim?

Those of us who drafted and signed the Nashville Statement believe that those voices are not right. Five years ago, we believed that the time was ripe to make an unambiguous declaration of our allegiance to the Lord Jesus and to his

revelation about who we are as sexual beings. Many of us believe that the fundamental challenge of our time is anthropological. Western man does not know who he is anymore. And he does not know himself because he does not know his God and Creator. He believes that his meaning and identity are self-determined, not God-determined.¹⁸ And he is raging against anyone or anything that would brook his self-determination.

Evangelicals at the beginning of the twenty-first century find themselves in a situation of great conflict over sexuality and gender. As we ask in the Preamble:

Will the church of the Lord Jesus Christ lose her biblical conviction, clarity, and courage, and blend into the spirit of the age? Or will she hold fast to the word of life, draw courage from Jesus, and unashamedly proclaim that his way is

¹⁸ Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020); Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022).

the way of life? Will she maintain her clear, counter-cultural witness to a world that seems bent on ruin?

Those of us who met in Nashville on August 25, 2017 showed up to answer that question in the affirmative. It is my aim in this essay to demonstrate why every Christian today should answer that question in the affirmative as well.

The Nashville Statement does indeed point the way forward for evangelicals, and it does so by addressing four challenges that evangelicals are facing: It addresses in biblical terms the moral status of (1) gay marriage, (2) disordered sexual desire, (3) gay and transgender identity, and (4) theological triage. There is much division in the evangelical world on each one of those questions. But our hope and prayer are that a declaration like this one would be a rallying cry for God's people to the truth.

GAY MARRIAGE

Shifting attitudes on homosexuality among

self-identified evangelicals is beyond dispute at this point. In the summer of 2017, the Pew Research Center reported a

dramatic shift in attitudes toward favoring gay marriage among a younger generation of white evangelicals...

Just a decade ago, the gap between younger evangelicals and older evangelicals on the issue was not wide, according to the Pew Research Center. But a new survey suggests that the generational divide has grown much wider, with about half of evangelicals born after 1964 now favoring gay marriage.

According to Pew, 47 percent of Generation X/millennial evangelicals (those born after 1964) favor gay marriage, compared with 26 percent of boomer and older evangelicals (those born between 1928 and 1964).¹⁹

The generational divide is clear. And it is not moving in the right direction. Attitudes

have shifted dramatically among millennial evangelicals, and they have revisionist teachers greasing the skids for them. You no longer have to go to a mainline church or seminary to find revisionist biblical accounts of sexuality and gender. These trends are increasingly making inroads into the evangelical movement at the popular level.

It was only in 2014 that Matthew Vines' book *God and the Gay Christian* hit the shelves, making the case that you can believe in biblical authority *and* embrace committed same-sex relationships.²⁰ He argues that the church has been wrong about homosexuality for the last two-thousand years because it has been misreading the Bible. Newer, revisionist accounts are the faithful readings. The older readings are not just wrong. Indeed, they are also repressive and harmful. Vines says nothing new in his book. He simply popularizes the work of James Brownson's 2013 book *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*.²¹

Brownson and Vines represent a new

departure in these conversations among evangelicals. In the past, evangelicals have been able to sniff-out erroneous approaches to these questions because the old way of affirming gay marriage typically began with dismissing the authority of scripture. For example, in a 2007 article on "Homosexuality and the Church," New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson writes:

I think it important to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. And what exactly is that authority? We appeal explicitly to the weight of our own experience and the experience thousands of others have witnessed to, which tells us that to claim our own sexual orientation is in fact to accept the way in which God has created us. By so doing, we explicitly reject as well the premises of the scriptural statements condemning homosexuality — namely, that it is a vice freely chosen, a symptom of

¹⁹ Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Poll Shows a Dramatic Generational Divide in White Evangelical Attitudes on Gay Marriage," The Washington Post, June 27, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/06/27/there-is-now-a-dramatic-generational-divide-over-white-evangelical-attitudes-on-gay-marriage/>.

²⁰ Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent, 2014).
²¹ James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).



human corruption, and disobedience to God’s created order.²²

You have to give credit to Luke Timothy Johnson for his honesty. His affirmation of gay marriage is downstream from his rejection of inerrancy and the authority of scripture. He makes that clear, and any evangelical with a modicum of discernment can detect up front that the prior issue is his rejection of the authority of scripture.

What Brownson and especially Vines achieve in their work is particularly significant, because they do not signal a rejection of the authority of scripture. Vines and Brownson want evangelicals to know that they can embrace gay marriage not because they *reject* the Bible but because they *believe* the Bible. They make the case that one can affirm the authority of scripture and gay marriage all at once. They offer revisionist readings and are

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careful not to offer an explicit denunciation of scripture when doing so. In this way, they are making an appeal to evangelicals in particular and are telling them that they can have their doctrine of inerrancy and gay marriage too.²³

This is not the place to rehash criticisms of Brownson’s and Vines’s work. This has been ably done at length elsewhere.²⁴ Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the path that Brownson and Vines lay out is an enormous temptation for struggling believers who feel that they don’t have social capital to spare in order to stand for conjugal marriage. Brownson and Vines offer the strugglers a way to avoid the reproaches of Christ even as they claim to uphold the authority of scripture. It is *that* temptation that the Nashville Statement wishes to confront.

The Nashville Statement leaves no room for such revisions, nor does it leave ambiguity on the question. Article 1 reads as follows:

WE AFFIRM that God has designed marriage to be a covenantal, sexual, procreative, lifelong union of one man and one woman, as husband and wife, and is meant to signify the covenant love between Christ and his bride the church.

²² Luke Timothy Johnson and Eve Tushnet, “Homosexuality and the Church: Two Views,” *Commonweal*, June 15, 2007, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/homosexuality-church-0>.

²³ Since the publication of the Nashville Statement, others have continued in this kind of argument. For example, see Karen R. Keen, *Scripture, Ethics & the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018). She writes, “Accepting same-sex relationships does not require compromising Scripture... I firmly believe it is possible to imagine a new response to the gay community — and to do so with faithfulness to God’s Word” (*ibid.*, 103, 114).

²⁴ E.g., Preston Sprinkle, “Romans 1 and Homosexuality: A Critical Review of James Brownson’s Bible, Gender, Sexuality,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 24, no. 4 (2014): 515–28; R. Albert Mohler, Jr., ed., *God and the Gay Christian: A Response to Matthew Vines, Conversant* (Louisville, KY: SBTS Press, 2014).

WE DENY that God has designed marriage to be a homosexual, polygamous, or polyamorous relationship. We also deny that marriage is a mere human contract rather than a covenant made before God.

In the Nashville Statement, we are not merely reasserting what the Bible says about the moral status of homosexuality. We are also saying that the gospel of Jesus of Christ offers hope for those laboring under the power of this particular temptation. As Article 12 articulates:

WE AFFIRM that the grace of God in Christ gives both merciful pardon and transforming power, and that this pardon and power enable a follower of Jesus to put to death sinful desires and to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.

WE DENY that the grace of God in Christ is insufficient to forgive all sexual sins and to give power for holiness to every believer who feels drawn into sexual sin.

We labor for moral clarity on these points not so that we can say, “Gays, keep out!” Instead we are standing with our arms wide open saying, “Please, come in. Come to the waters of life available to any and every sinner who turns from sin to trust in Christ.” But we cannot

make plain the path to life to those who think they do not need it. And the revisionists of our time — the Brownsons and the Vines — are leading these dear people away from Jesus and not to Jesus because they are telling them that they have no judgment to fear. This is the opposite of love.

DISORDERED SEXUAL DESIRE

In February 2014, I wrote an essay for the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission titled “Is Homosexual Orientation Sinful?”²⁵ In the article, I quoted portions from Wesley Hill’s book *Washed and Waiting* — portions that I believed to support my argument. Later that month, Wesley disagreed with me in an essay titled “Is Being Gay Sanctifiable?”²⁶ Wesley made the case that while some aspects of same-sex attraction or gay orientation might be fallen, not all aspects are fallen. In particular, those aspects that lead to chaste same-sex friendships are not sinful but, on the contrary, are sanctifiable. Wesley pushed back against my essay and Rosaria Butterfield’s then-recent book because we both had argued that homosexual attraction was sinful and needed to be repented of.²⁷ His underlying point is that it would be wrong for Christians to repent of same-sex attraction since same-sex attraction is not *all* bad. There were redeemable parts to same-sex attraction that needed to be clung to and cultivated and cherished.

Later that same year (2014), Wesley and I, along with Preston Sprinkle and Owen

²⁵ Denny Burk, “Is Homosexual Orientation Sinful?” *Canon & Culture* (blog), February 18, 2014, <http://www.canonandculture.com/is-homosexual-orientation-sinful/>.

²⁶ Wesley Hill, “Is Being Gay Sanctifiable?,” *Spiritual Friendship* (blog), February 26, 2014, <http://spiritualfriendship.org/2014/02/26/is-being-gay-sanctifiable/>. Later that year, Hill expanded on this thesis in “Is Being Gay Sanctifiable?,” in *Issues in Sexuality and Gender* (66th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Diego, CA, 2014).

²⁷ Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor’s Journey into Christian Faith* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant, 2012). Hill took issue with Rosaria’s insistence that same-sex attraction needed to be mortified. Rosaria writes: “What good Christians don’t realize is that sexual sin is not recreational sex gone overboard. Sexual sin is predatory. It won’t be “healed” by redeeming the context or the genders. Sexual sin must simply be killed. What is left of your sexuality after this annihilation is up to God. But healing, to the sexual sinner, is death; nothing more and nothing less.” Hill later went on to develop this more fully in his 2015 book Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015).

Strachan, came together in a session at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, and we tried to hash all of this out. We all presented papers followed by a spirited panel discussion. I had hoped that we might come to some common ground. While I think we may have come to understand each other better, we were still at odds over the moral status of same-sex attraction/orientation.

Wesley's book *Spiritual Friendship* came out in early 2015. The book I wrote with Heath Lambert, *Transforming Homosexuality*, came out later in 2015.²⁸ Preston Sprinkle's book *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* also came out in late 2015.²⁹ Our books made clear that we were still at odds over what the Bible has to say about homosexual orientation. This was hard because both sides of this debate were pointing to the Bible as our authority. Both sides agree about the Bible's prohibition on same-sex acts. Both sides are professing an orthodox evangelical faith. And yet we found ourselves at an impasse concerning gay attraction and orientation. Our differences on this point have both theological and practical implications that cannot be ignored.

We were not the only parties to this conversation. If you were paying attention in 2014, 2015, and 2016, you saw the back

and forth with Rosaria Butterfield, Owen Strachan, Sam Allberry, myself, and others forming one pole in this dispute and Wesley Hill, Ron Belgau, Preston Sprinkle, Nate Collins, and others forming an opposite pole. Notwithstanding the Roman Catholics at Spiritual Friendship, this had really shaken things up in evangelical conversations about sexuality.³⁰

Even within my little subset of Reformed evangelicalism, we were not all on the same page. In 2014, Reformed evangelicals were all over the place on this. In fact, we were not even using terms in the same way and could not come to agreement on what was meant by "orientation" and "attraction." For that reason, one of our aims in spearheading the Nashville Statement was to come up with biblical language that spoke to the issues in spite of our disagreement about disputed terms. The astute reader will note that the terms *orientation*, *gender*, *same-sex attraction*, and *identity* appear nowhere in the affirmations and denials of The Nashville Statement. Instead of defining disputed terms like orientation and same-sex attraction, we accessed the Bible's language about *desire*. And we did it perhaps most clearly in Articles 9 and 12:

WE AFFIRM that sin distorts sexual desires by directing them away from

the marriage covenant and toward sexual immorality — a distortion that includes both heterosexual and homosexual immorality.

WE DENY that an enduring pattern of desire for sexual immorality justifies sexually immoral behavior.

WE AFFIRM that the grace of God in Christ gives both merciful pardon and transforming power, and that this pardon and power enable a follower of Jesus to put to death sinful desires and to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.

WE DENY that the grace of God in Christ is insufficient to forgive all sexual sins and to give power for holiness to every believer who feels drawn into sexual sin.

These articles declare that sin corrupts not merely our deeds but also our desires. This applies to every person, not just gay people. Christ aims to transform and sanctify our deeds, but he also aims to transform and sanctify our desires. That is the fundamental issue. A desire for gay sex can never be a holy desire and can never bear the good fruit of chaste same-sex friendships, and that is why it must be repented of. The Nashville Statement clarifies this point.

GAY IDENTITY

As I mentioned above, careful readers of the Nashville Statement will notice that we did not use the term "identity" anywhere in the affirmations and denials. In the

drafting process, the term was so contested that we ended up leaving it out. I have since discovered that we are not the only ones who have had difficulty with this term. Eighteen years ago, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper said that the term's meaning is vague in social scientific literature. They write,

Whatever its suggestiveness, whatever its indispensability in certain practical contexts, 'identity' is too ambiguous, too torn between 'hard' and 'soft' meanings, essentialist connotations and constructivist qualifiers, to serve well the demands of social analysis.³¹

Brubaker and Cooper attempt to sort this out in a 47-page essay, but still today the term can have ambiguous denotations and connotations.

What do we mean when we use the word "identity"? I am convinced that this is a term more frequently used than thought about. Oftentimes, people deploy the term without being sure exactly what they mean by it. Perhaps as a point of departure, we could access the definition provided in the *Handbook of Self and Identity*:

The traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is... Identities are orienting, they provide a meaning-making lens and focus one's attention on some but not other features of the immediate context.³²

That definition is good so far as it goes, but it still leaves us with questions. Is

²⁸ Denny Burk and Heath Lambert, *Transforming Homosexuality: What the Bible Says about Sexual Orientation and Change* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2015).

²⁹ Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

³⁰ That conversation came to a head after the publication of the Nashville Statement with the launch of the Revoice conference in the summer of 2018. The founder of Revoice, Nate Collins, has said that he started Revoice in part as a reaction against Nashville. In a 2018 interview, Collins told Katelyn Beaty, "The NS embodied a posture towards the conversation about gender and sexuality that was pastorally insensitive and missiologically counterproductive... I personally view the NS as a form of spiritual abuse." See Katelyn Beaty, "Why Celibate LGBTQ Christians Stir Controversy on Right and Left Alike," Religion News Service, August 16, 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2018/08/16/beaty-oped-2/>.

The debate over the ethics of same-sex attraction continued apace after the publication of the Nashville Statement. The Revoice conference was founded as a so-called "Side B" response and repudiation of Nashville. That debate sharpened to a focus on the Bible's teaching about concupiscence. E.g., Denny Burk and Rosaria Butterfield, "Learning to Hate Our Sin without Hating Ourselves," Public Discourse, July 4, 2018, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/07/22066/>.

³¹ Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" Theory and Society 29, no. 1 (2000): 1–47.

³² Daphna Oyserman, Kristen Elmore, and George Smith, "Self, Self-Concept, and Identity," in *Handbook of Self and Identity*, ed. Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford, 2012), 69.



“identity” as a category something that is self-constructed, socially constructed, or perhaps both? If it is constructed in some sense, is that even the right way to go about determining what a human being is? Doesn’t the Christian tradition treat human ontology as a matter prior to and not contingent upon any human construction?

Ryan Peterson has shown that “the language of ‘identity’ has received wide acceptance” not only in the social sciences but also “in theological discourse,” and yet “the meanings of ‘identity’ have not been clearly articulated” nor has identity-language “been related to the traditional categories of theological anthropology.”³³ This is a huge weakness in theological discourse that accesses identity language. Identity language is on the rise, and yet we so often are not even sure what we are referring to when we use it.

Peterson argues that if we are going to make fruitful use of the term, then we have to make a distinction between “created and constructed identities.” On the one hand, a constructed identity is a *human* construal of what a person is. Whatever that construal may be, its key feature is that it is a *human* construction. And that human structure is malleable — it can change over time. As a human construction, identity is not fixed. On the other hand, “*Created identities* are those divinely determined realities that (1) make a creature the particular creature that it is, (2) fix the creature’s purpose in creation, and (3) fix the creature’s appropriate end.”³⁴ The key feature of a created identity is that it is divinely determined and prior to any human construction.

That truth reveals a problem that we face in the fallen human condition. Human

constructions may or may not match the divinely created identity. In Peterson’s words, “God is Creator and Lord, and the effort to arrive at self-definition apart from God is understood as sinful.”³⁵ Peterson is not talking about sexuality in this essay. He’s talking about theological anthropology more broadly. Nevertheless, he has put his finger on something that is absolutely salient to our discussion about gay identity. Any attempt at self-definition that contradicts one’s created identity is fundamentally sinful. This is the ancient wisdom of Psalm 100:3: “Know that the LORD Himself is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves...”³⁶ God determines who we are quite apart from and prior to any consideration we have of ourselves.

The primary issue at hand concerns how we define or construe ourselves and whether our self-definition involves an attempt to evade God’s created design or an attempt to embrace it. So-called “Side B” Christians — like those associated with the Revoice conference — have used the moniker “gay Christian” as an identity category. Even though they reject homosexual acts, they still view themselves as “gay Christians” and identify as such.

In the Nashville Statement, we did not use the term “identity” to get at this. Instead, we used the term “self-concept.” Why? Because It was our aim to say that our self-construal is morally implicated. This is most clearly seen in Articles 5, 7, and 13, but I will focus on Article 7:

³³ Ryan S. Peterson, “Created and Constructed Identities in Theological Anthropology,” in *The Christian Doctrine of Humanity: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders, Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 124.

³⁴ Peterson, 138.

³⁵ Peterson, 126-27.

³⁶ This translation of Psalm 100:3 is from the NASB and appears at the head of the Nashville Statement. Most modern translations, however, follow the Qere (the marginal reading) rather than the Kethib (the consonantal text), which is reflected in the NASB. The ESV represents the Qere reading as follows: “Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his.” See the explanation in the NET Bible notes on Psalm 100:3: “The suffixed preposition) לו ‘to him’ (was confused aurally with the negative particle אל because the two sound identical.” For our purposes, either reading would support the overall theological point we are making with this verse. God created us, and our “identity” is contingent upon his design.

WE AFFIRM that self-conception as male or female should be defined by God's holy purposes in creation and redemption as revealed in Scripture.

WE DENY that adopting a homosexual or transgender self-conception is consistent with God's holy purposes in creation and redemption.

The key term in Article 7 is “self-conception.” A self-concept is not merely what comes to mind when a person thinks of himself. It is also “what one believes is *true* of oneself.”³⁷ It is different from a *self-perception*, which implies a passive moral agency at best and which might also include an acknowledgement of one's fallenness. A *self-conception* involves an agent's active construal of himself in light of God's revelation. No matter what our self-conception is, it *ought* to conform to God's design in creating us and to the redemption of the body in the new creation. Homosexual and transgender self-concepts do not conform to God's design, and therefore should not be embraced as true.

THEOLOGICAL TRIAGE

The answer to the question of doctrinal triage — in my view — is as important as any other question that we are answering with the Nashville Statement. Why? Because one of the ways people corrupt sound teaching is not by an all-out revision of

traditional interpretations of scripture, but by an attempt to demote LGBTQ+ issues to a second- or third-order doctrine.³⁸ They suggest that differences over the questions among otherwise faithful Christians really should not be dividing us.

For example, Stephen R. Holmes argues for the traditional view of marriage, and yet he also argues that the church needs to make “pastoral accommodation” for committed gay couples who wish to join the church and to be a part of the church's life.³⁹ Just as divorced and remarried Christians are allowed to be members in good standing, so too should gay couples who wish to be a part of the church. Holmes writes, “Suppose a gay couple with children profess faith as a result of the outreach of the church. Is the breaking up of the family unit a pre-requisite for taking their profession of faith seriously? For baptism? For membership?”⁴⁰ Holmes's answer is essentially a “no.” Pastoral accommodations should be made that allow the immoral relationship to continue even as the congregant is baptized and accepted into the church's membership.

Another example we could point to is the conversation that unfolded among a handful of Christian writers late in the summer of 2017 before the release of the Nashville Statement. James K. A. Smith and Alan Jacobs both wrote arguing that those who affirm homosexual relationships and same-sex marriage can nevertheless be

“The issue of who the church recognizes as Christian is a *fundamental* question for all of us.”

“orthodox” Christians.⁴¹ An affirmation of untraditional sexual behavior need not nullify an affirmation of the creeds. They made their arguments, but they did not in the process announce a change in their own affirmation of conjugal marriage. They were merely saying that homosexual affirmation is not a matter of “orthodoxy.” Four years later, however, Smith wrote a social media post announcing an affirming position towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals.⁴²

Wesley Hill also waded into the discussion about the proper deployment of the term “orthodoxy” when it comes to current controversies about sexuality. Hill has been a consistent opponent of homosexual relationships and same-sex marriage. Nevertheless, he too recognizes as Christian those who embrace an “affirming” position. Hill writes:

As much as lies within me, until I have good reason to believe otherwise, I want

to assume that my interlocutors who affirm same-sex marriage and who say the same creed with me each Sunday do so in good faith, and deserve to be answered on the basis of the orthodox Christian theology they profess...

As much as I think the revisionist view of the morality of same-sex sexual intimacy is blatantly and tragically wrong, I cannot see that all of those who hold it have ceased to be my brothers and sisters in Christ, and therefore I cannot see my way clear to remove myself from fellowship with them.⁴³

The issue of who the church recognizes as Christian is a *fundamental* question for all of us. And here, Hill makes the case that even though he strongly disagrees with those who promote the “affirming” view, he still must recognize them as brothers and sisters in Christ and maintain fellowship with them so long as they continue to affirm the creeds.

It is here that the difference between us emerges. To see it, you have to think about how Hill's stance plays out in the life of a local church. I am a pastor. Suppose a man in my congregation comes to me and says, “I feel like the Lord is leading me to marry so-and-so. So-and-so is married to an ungodly man. She desires a godly husband, and I want to be that for her. So she is going to divorce him to marry me.” The man goes on to explain that his relationship with this other man's wife is actually not contrary to his commitment to Christ but will enable both him and the other

³⁷ Oyserman, Elmore, and Smith, “Self, Self-Concept, and Identity,” 69 (italics mine).

³⁸ See “theological triage” in R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “Confessional Evangelicalism,” in *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 68–96. See also R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 109–111.

³⁹ See Stephen R. Holmes, “Listening to the Past and Reflecting on the Present,” in *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*, ed. Preston Sprinkle, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 190–93.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 193.

⁴¹ James K. A. Smith, “On ‘Orthodox Christianity’: Some Observations, and a Couple of Questions,” *Fors Clavigera* (blog), August 4, 2017, <http://forsclavigera.blogspot.com/2017/08/on-orthodox-christianity-some.html>; Alan Jacobs, “Orthodoxy, Heresy, and Definitions,” *Snakes and Ladders* (blog), August 6, 2017, <https://blog.ayjay.org/orthodoxy-heresy-and-definitions/>.

⁴² James K. A. Smith, Twitter post, March 10, 2021, 10:58 a.m., https://twitter.com/james_ka_smith/status/1369679067440685059.

⁴³ Wesley Hill, “Fellowship with the Unorthodox? Some Thoughts on a Recent Controversy,” *Covenant* (blog), August 8, 2017, <https://livingchurch.org/covenant/2017/08/08/fellowship-with-the-unorthodox-some-thoughts-on-a-recent-controversy/>.

man's wife to follow Christ more faithfully. (That may sound far-fetched to you, but I have actually heard this defense of adultery before.)

As a pastor, what is my proper response to this would-be adulterer? Shall I confirm his affirmation of creedal orthodoxy and then let the adultery slide? He is, after all, not renouncing any fundamental doctrinal commitment. We are merely having a disagreement over a forthcoming divorce and remarriage. Since we have so much in common otherwise, should I just celebrate our common "creedal grammar" and continue to make appeals to him while staying united in fellowship?

I hope that you can see that such a response would be pastoral malpractice on my part. My actions would suggest affirmation even though I may personally hold a traditional view of marriage. The only proper response to such a situation would be to call that brother and sister to repentance and to make every effort to restore the sister's marriage insofar as it is possible to do so. If the brother and sister resist calls to repentance, then the faithful and loving response is for the church to pursue that couple with church discipline. If they continue to resist the church's call to repentance, then they must be excommunicated — meaning that they must be set outside of the church and no longer treated as a brother and sister in Christ.

Christ commands us to do this (Matt 18:15–18). The apostle Paul rebukes a church for failing to do this (1 Cor 5:1–2). It is not that Christians can never be in error without being excommunicated. It's

that the church can never be indifferent or passive toward brothers and sisters who fail to respond to such reproof. The church ultimately has to refuse to recognize sexual immorality as consistent with an authentic Christian commitment.

If the church's obligation is clear with respect to adultery, why would it be unclear with respect to homosexual immorality? If I understand Hill and Smith and Jacobs correctly, their argument would treat homosexual immorality as a special case in the life of a church. If someone sincerely holds to creedal orthodoxy and sincerely pursues or promotes a revisionist view of marriage, then the church must not disfellowship them but must continue to recognize them as Christian. This seems to me the opposite of what scripture commands us to do. This seems like a sure-fire way for the church to lose its distinction from the world altogether.



If a church that holds to biblical marriage allows members to affirm the sanctity of homosexual relationships, what is the difference between that church and an "affirming" church? A church will either recognize gay marriages or not. A church will either ordain "affirming" clergy or not. There is no in-between position at the practical, congregational level. And if a church does not enforce moral boundaries in a way that is consistent with its traditional beliefs, then its ecclesial practice is no different from a church that affirms homosexual relationships. It is a *de facto* "affirming" church.

That is why Article 10 is absolutely critical to the Nashville Statement. It is a work of theological triage in that it shows the priority of this issue in our doctrinal commitments. Article 10 says this:

WE AFFIRM that it is sinful to approve of homosexual immorality or transgender self-conceptions and that such approval constitutes an essential departure from Christian faithfulness and witness.

WE DENY that homosexual immorality and transgender self-conceptions are matters of moral indifference about which otherwise faithful Christians should agree to disagree.

Article 10 is not about *adiaphora* or how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. It is declaring that the affirming position is not merely aberrant Christianity. It is not Christianity at all. If this point is lost, then all is lost.

CONCLUSION

Why do we need the Nashville Statement, and why do we need it now? The reason is because Christians of every generation must follow Christ no matter what is thrown at them from the surrounding culture. In our generation, Christians in the West face massive resistance to what the Bible teaches about marriage, sexuality, and gender identity. It is becoming more and more costly socially, professionally, and legally to hew to the Bible's teaching on these things. Moreover, many ordinary Christians have been caught unprepared to answer some of these new questions. We wrote the Nashville Statement not as an innovation but as a rearticulation of the ancient faith in the face of current challenges. Our aim was to provide a resource for Christians and ministries who wished for their own confessional language to this end. We have achieved that aim, but the work still goes on. The challenges have only become more acute, and we have only just begun to meet them. ✕

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On Sexual Intimacy in Marriage

Words not only bear distinct meanings, but the way they are employed reflects back on the cultures that coin them.¹ So, for example, one evidence of the hyper-sexualized culture in which we live is the way the term “sexy” — which used to have a distinct meaning of “sexually alluring” — has morphed into a variety of spheres where the adjective would never have been used in years past: course descriptions, cars, and cameras, for example, are all sexy — or not, as the case may be! The new usage of this term even among Western Christians is surely indicative that the hyper-sexuality of our culture is re-shaping the world as well. Of course, human sexuality is important — too important, in fact, to be misused in this way.

THE PURITANS ON MARITAL INTIMACY

Now, this overt sexualization of modern culture is to some degree a reaction against what is perceived to be Victorian prudishness, sometimes wrongly labelled as “Puritan,” as we shall see. As Marxist historian Christopher Hill once observed, “very few of the so-called ‘Puritans’ were ‘Puritanical.’”² More generally, it is a reaction against what is perceived to be the Christian view of sex. But what exactly is that view? To journey through the history of sex in Christianity is to discover a number of differing perspectives. For instance, there is the clear delight that Puritans like Richard Baxter (1615–1691) had in sexual intimacy within the context of marriage. Here is Baxter giving advice to married couples:

“Husband and wife must take delight in the love, and company, and converse of each other.” There is nothing that man’s heart is so inordinately set upon as delight; and yet the lawful delight allowed them by God, they can turn into loathing and disdain. The delight which would entangle you in sin, and turn you from your duty and from God, is that which is forbidden you: but this is a delight that is helpful to you in your duty, and would keep you from sin. When husband and wife take pleasure in each other, it uniteth them in duty, it helpeth them with ease to do their work, and bear their burdens; and is not the least part of the comfort of the married state. “Rejoice with the wife of thy youth, as the loving

¹This article is an adapted portion of a Foreword to Hannah Turill, *The Shameful Act: Marriage and Sexual Intimacy in Tertullian of Carthage* (Peterborough, ON: H&E Publishing, 2022, forthcoming). Used with gracious permission of H&E Publishing.

²Christopher Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution Revisited* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 260–261.



“The sixteenth-century Reformation . . . was also a recovery of a biblical view of marriage and sexual intimacy”

hind and pleasant roe, let her breast satisfy thee at all times, and be thou ravished always with her love” [Proverbs 5:18–19].³

In a lifetime of studying Anglophone Puritanism and its worldview, J. I. Packer was convinced that the Puritans gave to marriage “such strength, substance, and solidity as to warrant the verdict that . . . under God . . . they were creators of the English Christian marriage.”⁴ To take but one example, the Puritan poet, Edward Taylor (1642–1729), of Westfield, Connecticut, once told his wife that his passion for her was as “a golden ball of pure

fire” and that their “conjugal love ought to exceed all other,” excepting only their love for the Maker of marriage.⁵ It was thus not fortuitous that when that quintessential Puritan text, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, listed the reasons for marriage, companionship came first. “Marriage was ordained,” we read in chapter 25.2, “for the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of mankind with a legitimate issue, and of the Church with an holy seed; and for preventing uncleanness.”⁶ As Packer has noted, Puritan preachers and authors are regularly to be “found pulling out the stops to proclaim the supreme blessing of togetherness in marriage,” which surely entails, among other things, sexual intimacy.⁷

THE ROOTS OF PURITAN VIEWS IN THE REFORMATION BATTLE

This clear delight in marriage and human sexuality as good gifts from God had its roots in the Reformation. The sixteenth-century Reformation is often remembered as a rediscovery of the heart of the gospel and the way of salvation, but it was also a recovery of a biblical view of marriage and sexual intimacy. The mediaeval Roman Catholic Church had affirmed the goodness of marriage but at the same time argued that celibacy was a much better option for those wanting to pursue a life of holiness and serve God vocationally.⁸ In fact, at the Second Lateran Council (1139), legislation was passed that only those who



were celibate were to be ordained. But it was precisely here that reality collided with theological legislation, for many of those who were technically celibate priests in the High and Late Middle Ages were not able to actually live chastely. As Calvin later noted: “virginity . . . is an excellent gift; but it is given only to a few.”⁹

One of the major scandals of the late mediaeval church was thus the very household of the parish priest, who was celibate but not chaste. His so-called “cook” or “housekeeper” actually served as his concubine.¹⁰ Little wonder, then, that Calvin regarded the Roman Catholic requirement of the celibacy of its priests

as “a modern tyranny” and “doctrine of devils.”¹¹ Calvin’s language, while strident, is not at all out of place. Sexuality has been and still is a major battlefield in the struggle for purity and holiness. And Calvin, wishing to take his guidance above all from the Scriptures, rightly saw the mediaeval Church’s position as both out of sync with the Bible and a doorway to sexual scandal.

As was the era of the Reformation, so ours is a day in which there is an enormous battle over sexuality and sexual expression. And if the modern Church is to be wise, she must cleave to the ancient paths laid down in God’s Word. ✕

³ Richard Baxter, *Christian Directory* 2.7 in *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter* (London: James Duncan, 1830), IV, 122–123.
⁴ J.I. Packer, “Marriage and Family in Puritan Thought” in his *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 259–260.
⁵ Cited Roland Mushat Frye, “The Teachings of Classical Puritanism on Conjugal Love,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 2 (1955): 158.
⁶ On the significance of the order of reasons given for the institution of marriage, see Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 261–262.
⁷ Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 262.
⁸ John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 24–25.

⁹ Cited J. Graham Miller, *Calvin’s Wisdom. An Anthology Arranged Alphabetically by a Grateful Reader* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 206.
¹⁰ Susan C. Karant-Nunn, “Reformation Society, Women and the Family” in Andrew Pettegree, ed., *The Reformation World* (London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 437–438.
¹¹ Cited Miller, *Calvin’s Wisdom*, 206; and Scott Brown, *Family Reformation: The Legacy of Sola Scriptura in Calvin’s Geneva* (Wake Forest, NC: Merchant Adventurers, 2009), 114.

Danvers, Nashville, and Early Complementarianism



I wrote the first draft of the Danvers Statement (1987). Thirty years later, I gave input on the final draft of the Nashville Statement (2017). The former was foundational for the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood; the latter expresses the Council's abiding relevance and maturity.

Here I will try to describe the similarities and differences between the Danvers and Nashville Statements. Then, as one of the early shapers and promoters of a "complementarian" understanding of manhood and womanhood perspective, I will respond to some recent criticism.

UNITY AND DIFFERENCE

First, as a shaper of both documents, I see a profound unity and prophetic difference between Danvers and Nashville. The unity can be seen, for example, in the following similarities.

- The Danvers Statement affirms that "both Adam and Eve were created in God's image, equal before God as persons and distinct in their manhood and womanhood." The Nashville Statement affirms that "God created Adam and Eve, the first human beings, in his own image, equal before God as persons, and distinct as male and female."

- Danvers laments "the widespread uncertainty and confusion in our culture regarding the complementary differences between masculinity and femininity," and the tragic effects of this confusion in unraveling "the beautiful and diverse strands of manhood and womanhood." Nashville similarly laments that the fact "it is common to think that human identity as male and female is not part of God's beautiful plan, [so that] God's good design for his creatures is thus replaced by the path of shortsighted alternatives."
- Danvers cites the "growing claims of legitimacy for sexual relationships which have Biblically and historically been considered illicit or perverse." Nashville names them: "It is sinful to approve of homosexual immorality or transgenderism . . . we deny that God has designed marriage to be a homosexual, polygamous, or polyamorous relationship."
- Both statements challenge the "spirit of the age," especially its encroachments into Christ's church. Danvers warns of "the apparent accommodation of some within the church to the spirit of the age at the expense of winsome, radical Biblical authenticity which in the power of the Holy Spirit may reform rather than reflect our ailing culture." Nashville sounds a similar alarm: "Will the church of the Lord Jesus Christ lose her biblical conviction, clarity, and courage, and blend into the spirit of the age? Or will she hold fast to the word of life, draw courage from Jesus, and unashamedly proclaim his way as the way of life?"

The prophetic difference between the two is that Danvers confronts women who intend to be pastors, while Nashville confronts women who intend to be men. Danvers confronts men who are unwilling to lead their wives; Nashville confronts men who can't lead their wives because they are "married" to men.

As the term "complementarian" was coming into being in

the 1980s, the antagonists were different from those of the Nashville Statement. For example, the subtitle of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood is A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. Thus the antagonists that we were addressing in those days were voices like Paul Jewett, Margaret Howe, Gretchen Gabelein Hull, Gilbert Billezekian, Aida Spencer, Patricia Gundry, Craig Keener, Berkeley and Alvera Mickelsen, and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen. I regarded all of these men and women not only as Christian but also as evangelical — at least at first. Danvers was, you might say, an in-house plea to family members to reconsider how they read the Bible.

But the Nashville Statement is not an in-house document. It is a prophetic No to the collapsing social order of the West, and Yes to the gospel-rich vision of God-designed sexuality. We did not expect, nor did we get, national, secular blowback to the Danvers Statement. The mayor of Danvers, Massachusetts, did not write to the *Washington Post* to distance himself from us. But the mayor of Nashville, Megan Barry, did: “The so-called ‘Nashville statement’ is poorly named and does not represent the inclusive values of the city and people of Nashville” (*Washington Post*, Sept. 2, 2017).

ABIDING URGENCY

In my judgment, both the social confrontation of the Nashville Statement and the complementarian breadth of the Danvers Statement, as unfolded in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, are as urgent today as ever. Of course, the Nashville Statement is more prominent and striking because so-called same-sex “marriage” and

“It is a prophetic No to the collapsing social order of the West, and Yes to the gospel-rich vision of God-designed sexuality.”

so-called “sex-changes” are media firebrands at the moment. But the 35-year-old Danvers Statement, with its complementarian applications in many good books, is, to this day, more pervasively applicable to all of life.

Consider the difference in scope: first, with the Nashville Statement, we try to convince a man that he should not “marry” a man. Okay, he says, I’m convinced. Then we try to convince him that he should not seek to change his sex to be a woman. Right, he says, I’m convinced. Then we try to convince him that polyamory, in or outside marriage, is wrong. Again he is convinced. Now, what’s left for him to decide about how to live as a man? Almost everything!

Which brings us back to the “big blue book” and the Danvers Statement. Complementarity, as it is unfolded in the Danvers Statement and *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, is still as urgent as ever. The Nashville Statement may feel more urgent because it addresses the current tragedies of so-called same-sex “marriage” and so-called “transgenderism.” But tens of millions of Christian men and women do not struggle with whether to “marry” the same sex or “change” their sex. But they do want to know, What does it mean to be a man (or a woman) in all the aspects of my daily life?

RESPONSE TO EARLY CRITICS

In recent days some have criticized the earlier formulations of complementarity because, they say, “Complementarians have neglected nature arguments, thus chipping away the ground on which we stand.”¹ Or as another critic says, “RBMW [*Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*], while well-meaning for the context it addresses, does not penetrate below the surface to actually define manhood and womanhood in terms of nature or essence.”²

I think both of those statements are inaccurate. “Nature arguments” abound in RBMW. Not only does it have

¹ Cited from the online version of the article by Patrick Schreiner, “Man and Woman: Toward an Ontology” in *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* (Nov., 2020), <https://cbmw.org/2020/11/20/man-and-woman-toward-an-ontology>.

² Cited from the online article “What Is a Man?” by Gregg Allison, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/what-is-a-man>.

"It will not suffice to speak to our essences without dispositional and

a full chapter dedicated to "The Biological Basis for Gender-Specific Behavior," but more importantly, it was a fundamental premise of the entire book that

- "Masculinity and femininity are rooted in who we are by nature."³
- "Masculinity and femininity are rooted in who we are by nature. They are not simply reflexes of a marriage relationship. Man does not become man by getting married."⁴
- "We are concerned not merely with the behavioral roles of men and women but also with the underlying nature of manhood and womanhood themselves."⁵
- "One of the theses of this book is that the natural fitness of man and woman for each other in marriage is rooted in something more than anatomy. There is a profound female or male personhood portrayed in our differing bodies. As Emil Brunner put it: Our sexuality penetrates to the deepest metaphysical ground of our personality."⁶

I see at least three reasons for the present tendency to overlook or minimize the outworking of this premise in early complementarity. First, we did not frame our analysis in terms of natural law. Second, even though our description

³ John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (1991; repr., Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), xxvi.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xxvi.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

children about natures and behavioral specifics."

of what is at the heart of manhood and womanhood was confessedly partial and highly nuanced,⁷ it has been misread as totalizing and superficial. Third, we were eager to shed light on the implications of nature for how we live in human relationships — all relationships. Therefore, we moved from nature and essence to dispositions and behaviors more quickly than some of our critics approve.

This was a risk I think we would take again. We were seeking to give help to pastors and churches concerning the practical implications of the *nature* of manhood and womanhood. Those practical implications remain just as pressing today. The risks multiply when you move from nature to practical implications and behavior. Such risk-takers will always be needed.

I am happy that another generation of complementarians are eager to sink the roots of complementarity deeper into nature and natural law. I pray that they will be willing to take the risky and controversial step of helping the father of a nine-year-old answer the question, "Daddy, what does it mean to grow up and be a man, and not a woman?" Or, "What does it mean to grow up and be a woman, and not a man?"

It will not suffice to speak to our children about natures and essences without dispositional and behavioral specifics. This is why I said earlier that Danvers complementarity continues to be relevant today. So, biased as I am toward *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, and happy as I am with confirming insights from "natural law," I still commend the "the big blue book" as offering crucial (not exhaustive) insights into the nature of manhood and womanhood and how the Bible helps us navigate all of life as male and female. ✕

⁷ For example, the descriptions of manhood and womanhood that I propose in chapter one of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* are cautiously presented as "not exhaustive descriptions of all that masculinity or femininity mean. . . . They are intended to embrace both married people and single people. . . . The definitions are not exhaustive, but they touch all of us. They are an attempt to get at the heart, or at least an indispensable aspect, of manhood and womanhood" (*Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 35).). Some critics have been inattentive to the nuances of these definitions. For example, when the descriptions begin with, "At the heart of mature masculinity. . ." the intention is that other important truths may also be "at the heart" of masculinity. That's why the words "at the heart" were chosen instead of "the heart of masculinity is." These and other nuanced wording do not seem to be carefully attended to by some critics.

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TODD PRUITT

Why I Changed my Mind on the Nashville Statement



I did not originate the title of this article. The *Eikon* editors initially asked if I would be willing to write about how and why my thinking had changed about the Nashville Statement. But in service to greater accuracy, it would be better for me to pursue the question, “Why I finally decided to publicly endorse the Nashville Statement.” I have never questioned the biblical fidelity of the Nashville Statement. My initial reluctance to publicly endorse it was due to other factors that were at play at the time, primarily the debate over the doctrine of the Eternal Subordination of the Son (ESS), of which I was a rather vocal participant. As many readers will know, that created an uneasy tension among those who were otherwise committed

to complementarianism. Plus, as naïve as this sounds today, I believed the Nashville Statement was entirely unnecessary.

Nevertheless, my reticence to publicly endorse the Nashville Statement was banished decisively by three developments. First, I was encouraged by certain things happening within the CBMW. Second, it was clear that the moral revolutionaries who were driving the culture war had gained enormous ground, even among professing Christians. But the most decisive factor in my support for the Nashville Statement had to do with certain events in the denomination which I serve as a pastor, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA).

“It would be difficult for us to speak too often about the God-given purposes and goodness of male and female complementarity”

In the summer of 2018, the first Revoice conference was held at a PCA church in St. Louis, MO. It is true that Revoice upholds the Christian ethic that sexual intimacy is exclusively for a man and woman within the bonds of marriage. On that much we agree. But it is also true that Revoice holds to so-called Side B “Gay Christianity”. It is not my purpose here to go into detail about the deeply flawed doctrines attached to the “gay but celibate” movement which Revoice represents. I will only say that it distorts the doctrine of humanity — the telos of the body and sexuality — undermines sanctification, and strips the gospel of its power to transform our desires. And so, like so many within the PCA, I was dismayed that one of our own churches would play host to an event propagating such grievous errors.

This conflict in the PCA intersected with the Nashville Statement in the summer of 2019. That year, an overture reached the floor of our General Assembly which

called for the PCA to declare that the Nashville Statement was biblically faithful. This overture (Overture 4) stated:

Therefore be it resolved that the Calvary Presbytery hereby overture the 47th General Assembly and asks it to declare the Council on Biblical Manhood & Womanhood’s “Nashville Statement” on biblical sexuality as a biblically faithful declaration and refer the “Nashville Statement” to the Committee on Discipleship Ministries for inclusion and promotion among its denominational teaching materials.

Keep in mind that the overture did not call for the PCA to add the Nashville Statement to our Book of Church Order. We were not “adopting” the Nashville Statement. Overture 4 merely called for the PCA to declare that its denials and affirmations were indeed biblical and therefore useful in our instructions. But Overture 4 was fiercely opposed by those in the PCA who either were supportive of or at least sympathetic to Revoice and the idea of Side B “Gay Christianity.”

One of the men who spoke against Overture 4 on the floor of the Assembly was pastor Greg Johnson of Memorial PCA in St. Louis, the same church that hosted the first Revoice conference the previous summer. Pastor Johnson continues to speak for and promote Revoice. And while many of those promoting Revoice and Side-B “Gay Christianity” in the PCA deny that they have “adopted a gay identity,” Pastor Johnson’s words that evening in Dallas in 2019 were quite illuminating.

Johnson (who claims to be “a six on the Kinsey scale”) stated on the floor of the Assembly that Article 7 of the Nashville Statement

excludes him. Article 7 states: “We deny that adopting a homosexual or transgender self-conception is consistent with God’s holy purposes in creation and redemption.” How can a man claim such a statement excludes him while simultaneously claiming not to have adopted a “gay identity”? How can it be that such an obvious affirmation of biblical truth is controversial among some ministers in the PCA?

Before the Assembly convened that summer of 2019, I had already decided to vote in favor of Overture 4 if it came to the floor. After the various speeches against adopting the overture — especially that of Pastor Johnson — I was happy to cast an enthusiastic vote in favor. I am glad to say it passed. I am sad to report that the fight over Revoice and Side B “Gay Christianity” goes on.

The breathtaking success of the new moral revolution has made both clarity and, yes, redundancy on issues of sexuality and gender all the more pressing. Bottom line, it would be difficult for the church of Jesus Christ to speak too often of the

doctrines of creation, anthropology, and the body. It would be difficult for us to speak too often about the God-given purposes and goodness of male and female complementarity. We will have to state repeatedly and persuasively things that we never thought we would have to explain, such as the fact that there are only two genders or that transgressive sexual practices that destroy the body are, in fact, bad for people.

There is a need for well-crafted and clear statements summarizing the Bible’s teaching about sexuality, gender, and what it means to be human. They are needful as means to catechize our children so that they may better resist the spirit of the age and avoid errors that will make shipwreck of their faith. But as the ongoing influence of Revoice makes clear, resources like the Nashville Statement are needful for the instruction of even our own pastors. ✕

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Reflecting on the Origins and Purposes of the Nashville Statement



What the organizers of the Nashville Statement saw as merely repeating what the church had always implicitly, if not at times explicitly, taught about human sexuality and embodiment, it was not received that way — to put it mildly. My experience helping organize the Nashville Statement stands to this day as one of the most significant memories of my career — a career, I should add, that has never run away from public controversy, but sees moments of public debate as necessary clarifications and precursors to continued faithfulness. My goal in this brief essay is to explain the origins of the Nashville Statement, the immediate response to its release, and its enduring significance.

The Nashville Statement is more or less a prequel to the Danvers Statement by way of content, even though it came afterward. Danvers dealt with ecclesial skirmishes related to pastoral roles and complementarity. The Nashville Statement was written in response not simply to egalitarianism, but to Western culture jettisoning Christian sexual ethics wholesale.

As I recall the events that led to the Nashville Statement, it began with Denny Burk contacting me to gauge my interest in helping coordinate a statement on sexuality and gender. CBMW was looking for a partner to collaborate with in order to help bolster the statement's gravitas and convening authority. Because of our aligned goals and convictions, Burk contacted

me. I was then working for The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) and at that point in my career, I had already taken public stances and written books on marriage and transgenderism. I saw it as imperative for evangelical Christians to speak clearer on these issues, believing as I did then that a secularizing culture was going to force evangelicalism's hand on the issues one way or another. So why not run towards the battle? After agreeing with Burk's need for such a statement, I approached the leadership of the ERLC and proposed that the 2017 Research Institute gathering happening concurrently alongside our 2017 National Conference be the venue to help convene a gathering of scholars from across the spectrum of evangelicalism to draft and ratify such a statement. The

leadership of the ERLC enthusiastically supported the decision, particularly my boss, Phillip Bethancourt. Bethancourt was responsible for the ERLC's part in the Nashville Statement coalition, and for that he is owed respect and gratitude.

The statement had been circulating for several weeks beforehand. The lead drafter was Denny Burk, after which I believe John Piper then had serious contributions. Other scholars, pastors, and potential signatories were invited to offer feedback through Google spreadsheets. Even considering the modest length of the Nashville Statement, I was struck by how much back-and-forth there was as to the precision of language. That was an eye-opening experience to see the value

of peer-review. Eventually, a deadline for no further commenting was reached, and the document was taken to Nashville for further discussion. The gathering was organized to further discuss, debate, and ratify the document. Leaders of the effort knew we were headed into the gathering with a document mostly likely 90-95% in final form, which proved to be right.

I honestly forget how many were in attendance, but upwards of one hundred influential pastors and scholars spent the day in a conference room at the Opryland Hotel in Nashville. There, we heard several talks related to the need for the statement. Changes were incorporated into the statement made by requests from the floor, which were profoundly helpful. As a legal technicality, it was the Council Members of CBMW that would be formally “adopting” the statement, but there was also a vote taken in the room to officially pass the document. There were no “no” votes if I recall correctly, some abstentions, and beyond that, affirmation by show of hands. Those agreeing to the statement were invited to put their name on a formal “Nashville Statement” document after the event concluded.

Then came the release of the Nashville Statement on August 29, 2017. The

response to the Nashville Statement stunned me. From trending nationally on Twitter, to denunciations of the statement by Hollywood celebrities, the Mayor of Nashville, and even fellow evangelical Christians (*Christianity Today*’s Mark Galli would go on to pen a silly editorial against it that failed to represent the Nashville Statement accurately). For a few days, if you were intricately involved with the Nashville Statement, it felt like one was on a very lonely island. Some relational tensions flared in the backchannels. News reports were done about the statement. Alternative “Nashville Statements” were drafted by progressive Christians. I have to believe that in the history of Christendom, the blowback the Nashville Statement received would have to rank up there in terms of public notoriety and public infamy. I am still convinced that the amount of vitriol registered was but a foretaste of the moral change and moral tsunami that was sweeping across Western culture. Had another statement populated with high profile Christian leaders come out in different form, there still would have been criticism.

If there is any regret I have about the Nashville Statement, it was the timing of its release. When the statement was released, Hurricane Harvey was raging and doing incredible damage in Texas. Honest self-

criticism could easily accuse the Nashville Statement of being tone deaf in the timing of its release. We could have waited a few weeks, but didn’t. That was a mistake. But for the substance of the Nashville Statement, I have no regrets and would do it again tomorrow if it was necessary.

What always mystified me, continuing to the present day, is the extent to which individuals can misread the purpose of a document, especially the Nashville Statement. The Nashville Statement was never intended to be the final, authoritative, and exhaustive statement on gender and sexuality. If anything, it was a mere blueprint. Our intention was that churches and institutions would then take the skeletal outline of the Nashville Statement and build upon it (which, not incidentally, the PCA ended up doing). One can say much more than the Nashville Statement said (and arguably should), but never less.

Others sadly cast the Nashville Statement as a Trumpian “culture war” artifact that was organized out of fear. I find the fear component particularly ironic since the very purpose of the Nashville Statement was to boldly clarify that matters of gender and sexuality are not adiaphora, but intricately tied to the logic of Scripture and creedal orthodoxy. “Fearful” or “longing for more nostalgic times” are not serious characterizations of those involved with its drafting and release. Others accused the drafters of failing to reckon with Christianity’s own hypocrisy and complicity in the sexual revolution. I am happy to acknowledge that evangelical Christianity has never been flawless in the execution of its own doctrine and ethics. That’s a fine criticism for others to make and for evangelicals to self-correct, even if I’m

not persuaded its inclusion was absolutely necessary. But I wholeheartedly reject the depiction of the Nashville Statement as any sort of tool to litigate the culture war. “Culture War” is a cheap and convenient metaphor to affix to virtually any cause that conservative Christians see as vital to the integrity of Christian doctrine and ethics.

The Nashville Statement endures into the present. I don’t know exact numbers, but considering that thousands of individuals have signed it, an untold number of institutions we only find out after the fact have adopted it, and even denominations have embraced the principles explicitly derived from the Nashville Statement, these facts leave me completely resolved that the Nashville Statement was a success and worth doing. My wish going forward is not only that the Nashville Statement continues to be adopted, but that even more faithful articulations of the tenets of the Nashville Statement are explicated for the sake of Christ’s church. ✕

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Five Years Later: REFLECTIONS ON THE NASHVILLE STATEMENT



The Nashville Statement on Biblical Sexuality was released on August 29, 2017 with initial signatures from over 150 leaders spanning the evangelical world, including the late J.I. Packer and R.C. Sproul. Other notable signatories include John Piper, D.A. Carson, John MacArthur, Albert Mohler, James Dobson, Alistair Begg, Randy Alcorn, Kevin DeYoung, and Randy Alcorn.

On this fifth anniversary, we asked several evangelical leaders to reflect on the impact and import of the Nashville Statement today. We continue to affirm this declaration of purpose from the Statement's preface:

We are persuaded that faithfulness in our generation means declaring once again the true story of the world and of our place in it — particularly as male and female. . . . We believe that God's design for his creation and his way of salvation serve to bring him the greatest glory and bring us the greatest good. God's good plan provides us with the greatest freedom. Jesus said he came that we might have life and have it in overflowing measure. He is for us and not against us. Therefore, in the hope of serving Christ's church and witnessing publicly to the good purposes of God for human sexuality revealed in Christian Scripture, we offer the following affirmations and denials.

To this same end, we offer the following republication of the Nashville Statement and fifth-anniversary symposium reflections. ✕

Nashville Statement

*"Know that the LORD Himself is God;
It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves..."*
-PSALM 100:3

PREAMBLE

Evangelical Christians at the dawn of the twenty-first century find themselves living in a period of historic transition. As Western culture has become increasingly post-Christian, it has embarked upon a massive revision of what it means to be a human being. By and large the spirit of our age no longer discerns or delights in the beauty of God's design for human life. Many deny that God created human beings for his glory, and that his good purposes for us include our personal and physical design as male and female. It is common to think that human identity as male and female is not part of God's beautiful plan, but is, rather, an expression of an individual's autonomous preferences. The pathway to full and lasting joy through God's good design for his creatures is thus replaced by the path of shortsighted alternatives that, sooner or later, ruin human life and dishonor God.

This secular spirit of our age presents a great challenge to the Christian church. Will the church of the Lord Jesus Christ lose her biblical conviction, clarity, and courage, and blend into the spirit of the age? Or will she hold fast to the word of life, draw courage from Jesus, and unashamedly proclaim his way as the way of life? Will she maintain her clear, counter-cultural witness to a world that seems bent on ruin?

We are persuaded that faithfulness in our generation means declaring once again the true story of the world and of our place in it — particularly as male and female. Christian Scripture teaches that there is but one God who alone is Creator and Lord of all. To him alone, every person owes gladhearted thanksgiving, heart-felt praise, and total allegiance. This is the path not only of glorifying God, but of knowing ourselves. To forget our Creator is to forget

who we are, for he made us for himself. And we cannot know ourselves truly without truly knowing him who made us. We did not make ourselves. We are not our own. Our true identity, as male and female persons, is given by God. It is not only foolish, but hopeless, to try to make ourselves what God did not create us to be.

We believe that God's design for his creation and his way of salvation serve to bring him the greatest glory and bring us the greatest good. God's good plan provides us with the greatest freedom. Jesus said he came that we might have life and have it in overflowing measure. He is for us and not against us. Therefore, in the hope of serving Christ's church and witnessing publicly to the good purposes of God for human sexuality revealed in Christian Scripture, we offer the following affirmations and denials.

ARTICLE 1

WE AFFIRM that God has designed marriage to be a covenantal, sexual, procreative, lifelong union of one man and one woman, as husband and wife, and is meant to signify the covenant love between Christ and his bride the church.

WE DENY that God has designed marriage to be a homosexual, polygamous, or polyamorous relationship. We also deny that marriage is a mere human contract rather than a covenant made before God.

ARTICLE 2

WE AFFIRM that God's revealed will for all people is chastity outside of marriage and fidelity within marriage.

WE DENY that any affections, desires, or commitments ever justify sexual intercourse before or outside marriage; nor do they justify any form of sexual immorality.

ARTICLE 3

WE AFFIRM that God created Adam and Eve, the first human beings, in his own image, equal before God as persons, and distinct as male and female.

WE DENY that the divinely ordained differences between male and female render them unequal in dignity or worth.

ARTICLE 4

WE AFFIRM that divinely ordained differences between male and female reflect God's original creation design and are meant for human good and human flourishing.

WE DENY that such differences are a result of the Fall or are a tragedy to be overcome.

ARTICLE 5

WE AFFIRM that the differences between male and female reproductive structures are integral to God's design for self-conception as male or female.

WE DENY that physical anomalies or psychological conditions nullify the God-appointed link between biological sex and self-conception as male or female.

ARTICLE 6

WE AFFIRM that those born with a physical disorder of sex development are created in the image of God and

have dignity and worth equal to all other image-bearers. They are acknowledged by our Lord Jesus in his words about “eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb.” With all others they are welcome as faithful followers of Jesus Christ and should embrace their biological sex insofar as it may be known.

WE DENY that ambiguities related to a person’s biological sex render one incapable of living a fruitful life in joyful obedience to Christ.

ARTICLE 7

WE AFFIRM that self-conception as male or female should be defined by God’s holy purposes in creation and redemption as revealed in Scripture.

WE DENY that adopting a homosexual or transgender self-conception is consistent with God’s holy purposes in creation and redemption.

ARTICLE 8

WE AFFIRM that people who experience sexual attraction for the same sex may live a rich and fruitful life pleasing to God through faith in Jesus Christ, as they, like all Christians, walk in purity of life.

WE DENY that sexual attraction for the same sex is part of the natural goodness of God’s original creation, or that it puts a person outside the hope of the gospel.

ARTICLE 9

WE AFFIRM that sin distorts sexual desires by directing them away from the marriage covenant and toward sexual immorality —

a distortion that includes both heterosexual and homosexual immorality.

WE DENY that an enduring pattern of desire for sexual immorality justifies sexually immoral behavior.

ARTICLE 10

WE AFFIRM that it is sinful to approve of homosexual immorality or transgenderism and that such approval constitutes an essential departure from Christian faithfulness and witness.

WE DENY that the approval of homosexual immorality or transgenderism is a matter of moral indifference about which otherwise faithful Christians should agree to disagree.

ARTICLE 11

WE AFFIRM our duty to speak the truth in love at all times, including when we speak to or about one another as male or female.

WE DENY any obligation to speak in such ways that dishonor God’s design of his imagebearers as male and female.

ARTICLE 12

WE AFFIRM that the grace of God in Christ gives both merciful pardon and transforming power, and that this pardon and power enable a follower of Jesus to put to death sinful desires and to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.

WE DENY that the grace of God in Christ is insufficient to forgive all sexual sins and to give power for holiness to every believer who feels drawn into sexual sin.

ARTICLE 13

WE AFFIRM that the grace of God in Christ enables sinners to forsake transgender selfconceptions and by divine forbearance to accept the God-ordained link between one’s biological sex and one’s self-conception as male or female.

WE DENY that the grace of God in Christ sanctions self-conceptions that are at odds with God’s revealed will.

ARTICLE 14

WE AFFIRM that Christ Jesus has come into the world to save sinners and that through Christ’s death and resurrection forgiveness of sins and eternal life are available to every person who repents of sin and trusts in Christ alone as Savior, Lord, and supreme treasure.

WE DENY that the Lord’s arm is too short to save or that any sinner is beyond his reach.



Confessional Integrity and the Nashville Statement



Confessional statements are essential instruments of accountability for every ministry committed to biblical and theological faithfulness. From the first seven ecumenical councils to more recent doctrinal formulations like the Nashville Statement, such documents provide necessary clarity and accountability for God's people.

Yet, the mere presence of confessional statements is insufficient. For such statements to be effective, they must not just be on the books, buried somewhere on the organization's website. They must be visible and active, a source of real and ongoing doctrinal accountability.

Historically, creeds and confessions have most often been occasioned by aberrant

teaching. Often, it is not until the normative, received teaching is challenged that the church must codify what had been widely accepted and assumed.

In the Patristic Era, heresies like Arianism and Docetism necessitated clear thinking on the Trinity and the doctrine of Christ. In the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, statements like the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Confessions codified reformation doctrine. Similarly, in the twentieth century, the *Baptist Faith & Message* arose from the Fundamentalist and Modernist Controversy.

More recently, our culture's rapidly changing beliefs on matters of gender, marriage, sexuality, and human identity — and many

"Yet, the mere presence of confessional statements is insufficient . . . they must be visible and active, a source of real and ongoing doctrinal accountability."

churches' willing embrace of these changes — prompted the Danvers Statement and now, most recently, the Nashville Statement.

Shortly after its formulation, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary's Board of Trustees formally adopted the Nashville Statement as a confessional requirement for all who teach at this institution. It now stands alongside the Baptist Faith & Message, the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, and the Danvers Statement on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood as required confessional statements that our instructional staff must affirm without hesitation or mental reservation.

For an institution like Midwestern Seminary, confessional statements serve both internal and external purposes. Internally, confessional statements convey what the instructional staff must believe and teach. It's not just contractual, it's covenantal. Those who teach must not merely agree to these statements, they must whole-heartedly embrace and cherish them. Professors must not just affirm these statements; they must willingly advocate for them.

Externally, confessional statements project to watching constituencies what the

institution believes and teaches. Parents have a right to know what their children will be taught. Prospective students have a right to know what they will encounter in the classroom. And local churches have a right to know their aspiring ministers will receive doctrinally sound instruction.

This covenantal relationship is especially true in our Southern Baptist context. The churches of the Southern Baptist Convention founded Midwestern Seminary, they own Midwestern Seminary, and they continue to sustain Midwestern Seminary by the students and financial support they send our way.

Thus, for Midwestern Seminary, the Nashville Statement was an essential addition to our formal confessional commitments. It more clearly articulated beliefs with which we already aligned, but by adopting it we give a clear and reassuring word to our internal and external stakeholders — and that is a clear and reassuring word that is needed in our age. ✕

Jason K. Allen is President of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and serves as a CBMW Council member.

A Storm Broke Loose: The Publication of the Nashville Statement in the Netherlands



It seldom happens that theological statements make the news in a secular country such as the Netherlands.

However, in the first week of 2019 this is what happened. The Dutch translation of the Nashville Statement set off a metaphorical bomb — the national news devoted attention to the topic, politicians were shocked, the prime minister expressed his disapproval, there were demonstrations in Amsterdam and extra police security was warranted during the church services of the signatories. Days on end, the media devoted extra coverage. The Netherlands was shocked that there were still people who held these convictions and expressed them in this day and age. Even though there are still thousands of orthodox Christians in the Netherlands today, the outside world seems to

be unacquainted with their convictions. The Nashville Statement changed this.

BACKGROUND

The Netherlands is a progressive country with respect to the LGBT ideology, which even amongst Christians causes questions and confusion. Several churches have joined this progressive movement. For example, in 2018, 400 progressive theologians published an appeal in the newspapers for complete acceptance of gay marriage in the church. In response to such developments, it seemed a good idea to several other pastors to create a Dutch translation of the 2017 Nashville Statement, and to draw attention to this statement in the churches and call for adherence.

At the end of December 2018, the document was ready for publication. The text was published online in the first week of January, including the names of the signatories, among which was the name of the reformed politician Kees van der Staaij, a member of the House of Representatives. When this became public, it caused a lot of turbulence.

The press started to get involved and the initiators were bombarded with questions from the media and invitations from famous talk show hosts came flooding in. I, myself, was visited by a spokesperson of the national news channel NOS. The broadcast produced a wave of negative (and, I am happy to add, positive) reactions via email. Even CBMW's president Denny Burk was interviewed about the background of the Nashville Statement and appeared on the news. Still, this did not help to overcome the negative connotations. Nashville was deemed "absurd" and "homophobic" and, according to the minister of Emancipation, it was "ruthlessly harsh and a step back in time."

People felt particularly offended by the claim in Article 7 that it is against God's purpose when persons adopt a homosexual or transgender self-conception. This claim simply intends to teach that homosexual or transgender feelings cannot be our deepest identity; however, people soon came to read and understand this statement as denying people experience transgenderism



or homosexuality. In addition, many Christians also contested this wording. In the Netherlands, it has been a common practice to differentiate between homosexual attraction and homosexual praxis. The fact that a person has homosexual feelings may not be something they can help; however, one should not practice homosexuality. But many thought the Nashville Statement was denying homosexual or transgender feelings.

Because the discussion about the link between homosexuality and identity was much further developed in America than in the Netherlands, this claim was not perceived as we intended. For that reason, the Nashville team in the Netherlands added a pastoral epilogue to the statement, tailored to the Dutch context.

They who in themselves recognize a homosexual orientation or struggle with their gender may know themselves to be a full member of the Christian congregation. For none of us can boast or pride oneself to be better; as we all should live by the grace of God. Everyone's heart is known to have a naturally sinful orientation and every human being knows of sinful desires, which are also expressed in a sexual nature. Battling sin, therefore, always means self-denial. That is a gift of God's grace which, most profoundly, is possible only in and by Christ and through the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ has come not to call the righteous, but sinners to repent and save them. That is what determines the Christian life. In this manner, our identity is not in our sexuality but it is in our relation to Christ. This is all with the knowledge that, here on earth, when we live by God's Word and in community with Him, it will give us the greatest joy, but only in part. The full victory over our sinful, old nature is coming soon, when all the true believers will forever be with Christ. Then, they will be made whole, with body and soul, devoted to Him and will He be all and in all.

AFTER THE STORM

The storm around Nashville did not die down immediately. The Public Prosecution Office investigated whether there

was any criminal liability. Thankfully, charges were not brought.. According to the Public Prosecution Office the claims made in the Nashville Statement fall within the scope of freedom of expression and religion. Although critics argue the statement had an adverse effect and ultimately furthered the LGBT ideology in our society, and ultimately only served the church, there has also been a positive effect.

Nashville was a wake-up call for churches and Christians which led to a new reflection on the themes of marriage, sexuality, and questions about LGBT ideology. One of the positive developments after the storm around Nashville was the establishment of a new organization which could be described as the Dutch equivalent of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, Bijbels Beraad m/v, which sees itself confronted with an increasing demand for good reading material and the equipping of churches and schools who yearn for scripturally acceptable teaching. ✕

Maarten Klaassen (Ph.D.) studied theology at Utrecht University, where he wrote his Master's thesis on John Owen. His Ph.D. dissertation is on the doctrine of justification in the reformed tradition (Amsterdam, 2013). Klaassen has pastored three congregations in the Netherlands, and today he lectures for Bijbels Beraad m/n to equip churches, schools, and Christian organizations on biblical marriage and sexuality.



A Reflection on the Nashville Statement

In a tweet from February 23, 2019, the late Rachel Held Evans said:

Bothers me when @CTmagazine & others refer to exclusionary policies against LGBTQ people as 'Christian orthodoxy.' You're entitled to your opinion, but don't act like something that Jesus never talked about and that doesn't get a mention in the creeds is a matter of orthodoxy.

This common sentiment raises a host of problems, the most glaring being the idea that if neither Jesus nor the creeds mention something, then it is not a matter of Christian orthodoxy. Fundamentally, statements like this display a stunning naïvety about how doctrines are debated and defined. The early creeds do not address "LGBTQ people" because the church was not challenged on these issues

seventeen hundred years ago. It is precisely because human sexuality was a settled matter that there was no need to verbalize that a man should not castrate himself to become a woman, or that homosexual relations are outside the boundaries of Christian behavior.

It takes doctrinal disagreement to produce statements that define what the church has always believed. Orthodoxy, to borrow from Vincent of Lérins, regards the faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all. The early church debated the Trinity and Christology, the Reformation justification by faith, and the modern period the inerrancy of Scripture. In our day, the great battle is anthropology. What does it mean to be a man? What does it mean to be a woman? What is good about human sexuality? What sexual behavior lies outside a historic, biblical Christian



ethic? How should men and women relate according to God's holy standards?

This raging battle, which has become exponentially fierce in each passing year, is exactly why we need new confessions like the Nashville Statement. Creeds, confessions, and statements such as this one define what the church has always believed in light of new controversy. To be sure, the mechanism is not quite the same as the early ecumenical creeds, given that the church is so fractured today. There can never again be, at least in my imagination, a universal creed set down by the church. This does not mean, however, that we should refrain from creedal statements, especially when historic Christian orthodoxy is on the line. And make no mistake, Christian orthodoxy is on the line right now..

It is up to our generation to give a decisive and unapologetic defense of the Christian

faith regarding human sexuality, which is what the Nashville Statement eloquently provides. The world needs to see the beauty of God's design for humanity and sexuality, and Christians need to see the wisdom of historic orthodoxy on these doctrines. That is why I am glad for the bold affirmations and denials of the Nashville Statement.

The preamble of the Nashville Statement wonders whether the church can "maintain her clear, counter-cultural witness to a world that seems bent on ruin." She can and she must. And this is not a matter of opinion, it is a matter of orthodoxy. ✕

Dr. Brian Arnold serves as the fourth President of Phoenix Seminary, where he also teaches historical theology. Prior to this role, Dr. Arnold pastored in western Kentucky.

The Nashville Statement on Biblical Sexuality



First Corinthians 15:58 states, “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

This verse comes just after a discussion of the victory we have in Jesus Christ. As leaders of Christian institutions, the Bible never instructs us to seek the approval of man or to lead by popular opinion. We must remain committed to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. We do not edit God’s Word. We faithfully deliver God’s Word to the next generation. Documents like the Nashville Statement help institutions address the problems of our time in at least two ways.

First, the Nashville Statement provides clarity. Leaders and institutions must clearly articulate doctrinal positions and future vision. It is difficult to address complex theological issues with precision in a vision statement, mission statement, core values, or even in an overall doctrinal statement. Documents such as the Nashville Statement identify theological boundaries that provide institutional clarity for future direction. This clarity allows faculty and staff to know exactly where a university like Cedarville stands on these issues presently and what it desires to be in the future. The Chicago Statement clarifies a conservative evangelical position on Scripture. The Danvers Statement clarifies a conservative evangelical position on the complementarity of gender roles. The Nashville Statement clarifies a conservative evangelical position on human sexuality. With human sexuality arguably standing as the primary issue of modern cultural confusion, the clarity of the Nashville Statement is most welcome. This is the reason Cedarville University has adopted Chicago, Danvers, and Nashville as clarifying documents for our University. We want faculty, staff, and students who come to our University to know exactly where we stand. Such documents help us provide truth in advertising to students and an opportunity to join others in boldly standing for Christ.

Second, the Nashville Statement provides precision. To address every issue would require a book of significant length, but in relatively few words the Nashville Statement addresses the essential topics, providing precision on the conservative evangelical stance on human sexuality. Most presidents of Christian institutions

“With human sexuality arguably standing as the primary issue of modern cultural confusion, the clarity of the Nashville Statement is most welcome.”

do not have PhDs in theology, and some institutions do not have theologians capable of articulating precision on complex controversial topics in a succinct statement that constituents can process.

Written and affirmed by many theological experts and signed by over 24,000 people, the Nashville Statement provides much needed clarity and precision for Christian institutions like Cedarville. I am thankful to have been a small part of the process and to serve at a Christian university that has adopted the Nashville Statement as a clarifying document. ✕

Thomas White is President of Cedarville University and serves as a member of the CBMW board and council.

The Nashville Statement in German

I can still remember the day when I first saw the Nashville Statement. It was at the end of August in 2017. After reading it for the first time, I thought: this statement pretty much addresses the questions we are currently discussing in German-speaking communities. It creates the transparency and clarity we need to face the challenges that anti-essentialist schools of thought and the LGBTQ+ movement have brought to our society and the church. The chosen form, with its affirmations and denials, helps avoid misunderstandings and ambiguities.

As editor of *Evangelium21*, I promptly contacted our chairman, Pastor Matthias Lohmann. He gave a similarly positive assessment of the document, and within just a few days the leadership of our reformed-oriented network got behind the statement. We wanted to make it known not only in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, but we also wanted to provide an accurate German language translation as soon as possible.

We are grateful that Colin Smothers of CBMW granted us the translation rights. As early as mid-September, we were able to make a digital edition of the Nashville Statement available for free download. On September 21, 2017, we issued the following press release:

Based on the observation that Western culture in the 21st century has become increasingly post-Christian and has begun to "redefine entirely what it means to be a human being," the Nashville Statement calls on the church to gratefully affirm God's beautiful, created order as set forth in Scripture and evident in nature. "We do not belong to ourselves. Our true identity as male and female has been given to us by God. To try to make something of ourselves other than what God created us to be is not only foolish but doomed to failure," the declaration says. It urges recognition of the equality of men and women and at the same time affirmation of the differences between the sexes.¹

A few days later, we were also able to hand out a print edition free of charge. The interest was enormous. Since then, the third edition of the booklet has been published. We have sent out several thousand copies or distributed them at conferences. Like-minded networks have drawn attention to the document and soon other organizations requested reprint permissions.

Within confessional Christian circles, the response was overwhelmingly positive. Many brothers and sisters were pleased to finally have a document that could serve as a basis for bringing clarity to heated discussions. What is more, many increasingly saw the field of sexual ethics as an important touchstone for the confessional stability of Christian congregations and had come to realize that

¹"Pressemitteilung zur Veröffentlichung der Nashville Erklärung," September 21, 2017, https://www.evangelium21.net/downloads/pdf/pressemitteilungen/Pressemitteilung_E21_Nashville.pdf.



biblical pastoral counseling can only succeed if it is preceded by a theological clarification.

But there was also a headwind. Nadia Bolz-Weber, the managing editor of a major evangelical internet platform, countered the Nashville Statement with a statement of her own, the Denver Statement. That statement's conclusion



is revealing: “Oh yes: Which statement is more in line with my own faith? Denver. Basically, I can sum it up with the beginning of the tenth statement[s]: For the sake of freedom, Christ set us free, not to make us slaves again to new rules and fears.”² Reverend Wielie Elhorst of Amsterdam, in an interview with a publication of the Evangelical Church in Germany, asserted that “The [Nashville] statement denies and rejects all the theological and biblical scientific research findings of the last decades. These help to better understand sexuality and gender identity, also regarding the world in which we live. The statement also does not refer to any sound biblical hermeneutics.”³

At the beginning of 2019, we suddenly had unimaginably high access rates to the digital edition of the German Nashville Statement. The reason was that the weekly magazine *DIE ZEIT*, which is very well-known in

Germany, reported on the debate that had flared up in the Netherlands. In the digital edition of the magazine, our website was linked and the statement was downloaded by numerous readers. *DIE ZEIT*, however —not surprisingly— backed the critics of the Nashville Statement, reporting, “According to media reports, several Protestant churches raised the rainbow flag to show that everyone is welcome. Dutch prosecutors are investigating the criminal nature of the text.”⁴

It was clear to most well-meaning readers in the German-speaking world, of course, that the statement was not intended to be read as a political declaration, but was about necessary clarifications within the church. Here in Germany the Nashville Statement has served us very well. Perhaps more than elsewhere in the world, we are currently struggling over Christian sexual ethics. We are grateful that the authors of the Nashville Statement are helping in this debate. Matthias Lohmann stresses

“God . . . has given us a very good and beautiful order to protect family life and sexuality”

the statement's importance: “Although being a Christian must not be confused with a sexual morality, we cannot abandon the biblical view of sexuality.” God, as the creator of human life, “has given us a very good and beautiful order to protect family life and sexuality, which, after all, makes human beings very vulnerable.”

We believe the Nashville Statement upholds this beautiful, God-given order.



⁴“Konservative Christen unterzeichnen Nashville-Erklärung,” *Zeit Online*, January 8, 2019, <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2019-01/niederlande-konservative-christen-nashville-erklarung-homosexualitaet-kritik>, accessed September 15, 2022.

²“‘Nashville’ und ‘Denver’ im Vergleich: Wie glaubst du?” *Auf’n Kaffee*, September 2017, <https://aufnkaffee.net/2017/09/nashville-und-denver-im-vergleich-wie-glaubst-du/>, accessed September 25, 2022.

³*Ibid.*

Ron Kubsch serves as Editor in Chief at Evangelium21

A Reflection on the Nashville Statement

At Union University, we seek to establish all aspects of life and learning on the Word of God. This is who we are, it is who we have been, it is who we are committed to be in the future. Generations of students and their families have trusted Union because of this commitment. And we are unwavering in this promise as we celebrate our Bicentennial, having been founded in 1823.

Institutions shape people. As an institution, Union has common convictions and core values that guide all of us as we grow and develop. However, even this basic idea

that institutions are designed to shape individuals is contested today. As expressive individualism has become dominant in the culture, Carl Trueman has observed, “institutions cease to be places for the formation of individuals via their schooling in various practices and disciplines that allow them to take their place in society. Instead, they become platforms for performance, where individuals are allowed to be their authentic selves.”¹

As a Christ-centered university, we see things differently. At Union we want to conform

¹Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 49.

ourselves to Christ. Our Statement of Faith proclaims, “the Bible itself, as the inspired and infallible Word of God that speaks with final authority concerning truth, morality, and the proper conduct of mankind, is the sole and final source of all that we believe.” So we reject the idea of institutions as platforms and instead see our aim as shaping and molding our students. Thus, believing that institutions are intended to shape people, I was grateful to participate in the convening group to discuss and consider the Nashville Statement. And, I was glad to be one of the initial signatories of the Statement. I should add that I was encouraged that three others from Union were part of that initial group to sign. Further, the Union University Board of Trustees unanimously adopted a resolution of agreement with the Statement and expressed appreciation for the biblical clarity of it.

A quick review of surveys that Lifeway Research and others put out each year

demonstrates the need for clarity on essential doctrines of the Christian faith as well as the moral issues of the moment. Put another way, there is a lot of bad theology and confusion out there. Churches, and the institutions connected to them, need clear, unambiguous articulation about what Scripture teaches concerning the most important and contested questions of the day. For us, living in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, these questions involve biblical anthropology and sexuality. We need sound teaching. The Nashville Statement offers that. As leaders and as an institution we want to be clear, we want to be helpful, and we want to encourage Christians who seek to live faithfully. Five years on, the Nashville Statement continues to serve that purpose. ✕

Samuel W. “Dub” Oliver (Ph.D.) is President of Union University.



Reflections Nashville



On The Statement

When the Supreme Court of the United States recognized same-sex marriage as the law of the land on June 26, 2015 in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, I immediately responded by saying that we have opened a Pandora's Box that had no floor. How little did I realize what an understatement that was. Five Justices had redefined marriage and rejected centuries of a virtually unanimous understanding of what marriage is: a union of a man and a woman in conjugal and covenantal relationship. But, there is a paradox that followed the *Obergefell* decision. As Albert Mohler rightly observed, "Everything has changed, and nothing has changed." Everything has changed because we have opened the door to an "anything goes" ethic and understanding of marriage. Same-sex marriage is simply the first step in the deconstruction of a once understood sacred union between a man and woman. Polygamy, incestual marriages, multi-

partner marriages and who knows what else will surely follow. The Supreme Court has laid its own trap that it will find next to impossible to escape, as radical autonomy and freedom become the rails on which its train will now run.

And yet, nothing has changed — at least for the Christian who looks to the word of God for guidance and direction. That is one reason I am extremely grateful for the men and women who boldly and compassionately penned the Nashville Statement on Biblical Sexuality in 2017. Born out of a conviction that the Bible speaks clearly to gender, sexuality, and marriage, the Nashville Statement points to God's good design for human flourishing and joy while also celebrating his good gifts of male-female complementarity and monogamous, heterosexual marriage. "The Father knows best" could summarize the theme of this necessary declaration.

Those who authored the Nashville Statement, as well as the more than 24,000 persons who have gladly added their signature, know they are swimming upstream and against the torrid currents of an increasingly post-Christian culture. But the church follows the marching orders of a crucified and risen King, not the whims of a culture bent on its own demise. We joyfully declare in concert with Holy Scripture the “true story of the world and of our place in it — particularly as male and female,” and we affirm and confess that “our true identity, as male and female persons, is given by God.” While loving unconditionally the LGBTQ+ community, we must speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15), identify sin where we see it, and point to the hope of a new creation we can all experience in Christ (2 Cor 5:17).

I believe the Nashville Statement is a concise and faithful summary of divine truth revealed in God’s inerrant Word. It is grounded in God’s good creational design (Gen 1–2) and immersed in the redeeming gospel of Jesus Christ. This is why I was honored to be one of the original signatories to this historic and critically needed statement. It is desperately necessary and a correction to a society rushing headlong into the quicksand of its own destruction. ✕

Danny Akin is president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and also serves on the CBMW board and council.



Transgender and Teenagers

¹ In June 2022 Sharon James was invited to give an online seminar for the Rebuild Conference for church leaders in Newport, Wales. https://www.dropbox.com/s/1lti3mp60we23nh/2206_TransgenderandTeenagers_SJ.mp4?dl=0. This article is an abridged and updated transcript.

² The Christian Institute, "NHS England to Close the Trans-affirming Gender Clinic Mired in Controversy," July, 2022, NHS England to close the trans-affirming gender clinic mired in controversy - The Christian Institute.

In May 2014, *TIME* magazine ran a cover story headlined "The Transgender Tipping Point." It was now no longer possible to ignore the trans movement.¹

Eight years later, it is no longer possible to ignore the irreversible damage being done to countless young people in the name of this false ideology. For years, concerns have been raised about the way that the Tavistock clinic in London has been giving out dangerous drugs to children and young people like candy. In July, after an independent report found it was not fit for purpose,² NHS England announced that it will be closed next year. *The Times* commented:

The damage done is immeasurable. No one knows how years of ideological dogma, inappropriate treatment, and a culpable failure to consider the overall mental welfare of the children treated by the Tavistock Clinic



will affect the thousands referred to its Gender Identity Development Service.³

The closure of this clinic is good news. But across the Western world, increasing numbers of teenagers are experiencing gender confusion. What is going on? How should the church respond?

We ought to hold two fundamental principles in mind as we consider these questions. Whoever we are dealing with, whatever their age, we need to treat them with dignity, respect, and compassion. The biblical and Christian conviction is that every human being is made in the image of God. And, whoever we are dealing with, real compassion may not necessarily mean affirming what people claim about themselves. Proof of this comes from the rapidly increasing number of testimonies from detransitioners, those who have lived as the opposite sex, and may have undergone hormonal treatments and surgical procedures, but then regret their transition and go back to live as their biological sex.

The NHS Gender Identity Development Service works with children and young people in England.⁴ It has seen an increase of more than 3,000 percent over the last decade in referrals for “gender dysphoria,” the feeling that you were born in the wrong body.⁵ There were 77 referrals to the Gender Identity Development Service in 2009–10.⁶ This number rose to 2,728 in 2019–20. Referrals have gone from being over half boys to nearly three quarters girls.⁷ This trend has been noted across the Western world.

TRANS AMONG THE YOUNG AND OLD

Some children profess to be unhappy in their biological sex at an early age. Studies have shown that in 80% or more of these children, this feeling resolves spontaneously as the child goes through puberty (if that process is not

interrupted by hormonal treatments).⁸ That is why, in the past, the advice was to discourage cross-sex dressing, kindly affirm the biological sex of the child, and let puberty take its course. This was known as “watchful waiting.”

Today, however, there is often pressure to affirm what children say about their gender identity and to allow what is called “social transition,” letting a child dress like the opposite sex, use a new name to fit their chosen identity, and so on. Then comes pressure to allow such children to take puberty blockers. These blockers remove nature’s own remedy for gender confusion and there are no long-term tests to indicate the safety of such interventions. Serious concerns exist around effects on bone density, brain development, and psychological development,⁹ which is why some nations (Sweden,¹⁰ France,¹¹ Finland,¹²) and some states in America¹³ have called for a halt to the prescription of puberty blockers (except for exceptional cases where they are deemed medically necessary).

Children with autistic traits sometimes seem likely, for complex reasons, to experience a measure of gender nonconformity. In recent years, activists have sometimes pushed such young people toward the idea that gender transition may help, which only compounds the difficulties such youngsters already experience.¹⁴

There are also some adults who suffer from a sense of being in the wrong body. Those who experience discontent with their biological sex and who live as someone of the opposite sex (transsexuals) are biologically completely normal. This is a different issue than those born with an “intersex” condition (extremely rare cases where there’s a physical anomaly, or some other issue with sexual development).

³ Richard Byng, et al. (2019), “Written submission to Women and Equalities Select Committee,” <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/women-and-equalities-committee/health-and-social-care-and-lgbt-communities/written/102806.html> (accessed October 1, 2022).

⁴ As mentioned above, this clinic is due to close in 2023.

⁵ The Christian Institute, “The Transgender Craze,” September, 2020, <https://www.christian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/TransgenderCraze.pdf>.

⁶ National Health Service (NHS), “Gender Identity Development Service Referrals in 2019–2020,” <https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/about-us/news/stories/gender-identity-development-service-referrals-2019-20-same-2018-19/>, (accessed October 1, 2022).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Richard Byng, et al. (2019), “Written submission to Women and Equalities Select Committee,” <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/women-and-equalities-committee/health-and-social-care-and-lgbt-communities/written/102806.html> (accessed October 1, 2022).

⁹ Transgender Trend, “Puberty Blockers,” <https://www.transgendertrend.com/puberty-blockers/>, (accessed October 1, 2022).

¹⁰ Society for Evidence Based Gender Medicine, “Sweden’s Karolinska Ends All Use of Puberty Blockers and Cross-Sex Hormones for Minors Outside of Clinical Studies,” May 5, 2021/February, 2022.

¹¹ Wesley J. Smith, “France’s Academy of Medicine Urges ‘Great Medical Caution’ in Blocking Puberty,” *National Review*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/frances-academy-of-medicine-urges-great-medical-caution-in-blocking-puberty/>.

¹² Wesley J. Smith, “Finns Turn against Puberty Blockers for Gender Dysphoria,” *National Review*, July 25, 2021, <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/fins-turn-against-puberty-blockers-for-gender-dysphoria/>.

¹³ Kim Chandler, “Alabama Bill Seeks to Ban Hormone Treatments for Trans Youth,” *AP News*, February 24, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/health-lifestyle-alabama-gender-identity-congress-bbe8b54f14865537db44b6a6edc96250>.

¹⁴ Elise Ehrhard, “The Transgender Movement targets Autistic Children,” *Crisis Magazine*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2016/autism-transgendered-movement>.

Cases where genital anatomy is ambiguous affect fewer than 1 out of every 5,000 live births.¹⁵

Not all adult transsexuals endorse or promote the current, very politicised brand of gender ideology. Many are horrified at the way young people and children seem to be targeted by activists. Debbie Hayton, for example, is a man who has fathered three children. Debbie now lives as a woman but insists: “We can never change sex”¹⁶ and says:

. . . transsexuals like me look in horror at what looks like a recruitment drive among the very young . . . Children are victims of this [gender] ideology, and they are being irredeemably harmed . . . we speak up because we care about children.¹⁷

TRANS TARGETING TEENS

In recent years we have seen a rapidly increasing number of adolescents claiming to be trans, many of whom have no history of gender dysphoria before puberty. It is common today for whole friendship groups to want to transition together. Dr. Lisa Littman of Brown University has popularized the term “rapid onset gender dysphoria” (ROGD). Her pioneering research, which analyzes 256 parental reports about teens experiencing gender dysphoria, was published in 2018.¹⁸

Dr. Littman describes a phenomenon in teenagers (especially girls) who suddenly start presenting as transgender having experienced no previous gender dysphoria. They may be gripped by the feeling that they were born in the wrong body; they may also experience intense distress. Dr. Littman hypothesizes that this could be the result of a social contagion, where peers mutually influence one another toward a particular type of behaviour.¹⁹ She found that, before identifying as

transgender, many of them experienced:

- A history of social anxiety, isolation, and difficulty forming friendships
- A history of trauma
- Friendships with others identifying as trans
- An increase in social media use

Parents identified the influences on their youngsters as:

- YouTube transition videos
- Tumblr
- A group of friends they knew in person and/or a community of people they met online

The social media site Reddit, for example, is brimming with anxious people crying out for advice from peers. They ask questions such as:

- I’m confused about my gender
- Trying to figure out if I’m trans or not
- I honestly don’t know if I’m trans or not — any advice?
- Apparently, I may be trans?
- Do I have dysphoria?
- Is it gender dysphoria? Can you help me? I don’t know if I really want to be a girl – I’m so confused . . .²⁰

In response, such youngsters are told that even posing these questions indicates that they must be trans. They are then presented with loaded messaging:

- The idea that, “If they didn’t transition immediately, they would never be happy.”
- Instructions about what to say to a doctor “to convince them to provide hormones.”
- The idea that, “They should use the ‘suicide narrative’ to convince parents.”
- The idea that, “It is acceptable to lie to... a doctor or therapist in order to get hormones faster.”²¹

¹⁵ Leonard Sax, “How Common is Intersex? A Response to Anne Fausto-Sterling,” *The Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (August 2002), 175.

¹⁶ Debbie Hayton, “Transition is not the solution: A Personal Testimony,” FET Bulletin, 182, Summer 2021, 4, <https://familyeducationtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/FET-Bulletin-182.pdf>.

¹⁷ Debbie Hayton, “The Madness of Radical Trans Activism,” May 24, 2021, www.debbiehayton.com (accessed October 5, 2022).

¹⁸ Lisa Littman, “Parent reports of adolescents and young adults perceived to show signs of a rapid onset of gender dysphoria,” PLoS ONE, 13(8), 16 August 2018; see also Lisa Littman, “Correction: Parent reports of adolescents and young adults perceived to show signs of a rapid onset of gender dysphoria,” PLoS ONE, 14(3), 19 March 2019.

¹⁹ The Christian Institute, “Social Contagion,” September, 2020, <https://www.christian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/SocialContagion.pdf>; “The Transgender Craze,” September, 2020, <https://www.christian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/TransgenderCraze.pdf>.

²⁰ Anon, “How Do I Know That I’m Trans?,” [www.reddit.com, https://www.reddit.com/r/ask_transgender/comments/ej72j8/how_do_i_know_that_im_trans/](https://www.reddit.com/r/ask_transgender/comments/ej72j8/how_do_i_know_that_im_trans/) (accessed October 1, 2022).

²¹ Littman, op.cit.

Commonly experienced adolescent anxieties are used as evidence that a young person is “truly transgender.” For example, the “Transgender Teen Survival Guide” seen on Tumblr claims that the following can all be signs of dysphoria:

- A sense of misalignment, disconnect, or estrangement from your own emotions.
- A seeming pointlessness to your life, and no sense of any real meaning or ultimate purpose.
- Wishing you could be normal.²²

But as wisdom understands, these are common experiences for anyone going through teenage years.

So today, large numbers of teens who have had no previous history of gender confusion, suddenly, often due to social media influence or peer group example, identify as trans.

TRANS ACTIVISTS

Alongside peer group pressure, gender ideology is being promoted by voluntary organizations, charities,²³ online influencers, and sometimes in schools as well. One LGBT group tells young people:

... everyone has a gender identity. This is the gender that someone feels they are. This might be the same as the gender they were given as a baby, but it might not. They might feel like they are a different gender, or they might not feel like a boy or a girl.

Note the emphasis on feeling rather than truth. In a therapeutic culture, personal feeling all too often trumps everything else.²⁴ It is dangerous to tell children they must always trust their feelings. Maturity involves learning not

to trust our feelings when there is no evidence to support them.²⁵

Many children and young people are being told that:

- Your sex is assigned at birth, it is not innate or biological.
- You can choose your gender identity.
- If you have a girl body but like making things and fixing things you may really be a boy trapped in the wrong body.
- If you have a boy body but like pretty things you may really be a girl trapped in the wrong body.

This false ideology is being backed up with fictional stories. Picture books at primary school, even nursery-level, introduce this idea.²⁶ Gender ideology has made its way into schools through “guidance,” sometimes sent out by campaigning organizations that suggest schools must affirm children and young people in whatever gender identity they claim. Some schools provide identity-affirmative counselling to pupils behind their parents’ backs based on such “guidance.” Teachers, parents, governors, and counsellors who have doubts are often afraid to challenge it.

Another factor is teenage insecurity. *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters*²⁷ is a journalist’s inquiry into the surge in gender dysphoria among teen girls. In this book, Abigail Shrier explains that many teens struggle with insecurity and awkwardness. Today, many are encouraged to interpret these natural feelings as symptoms of gender dysphoria, and then they are undergoing irreversible damage in the pursuit of resolving these feelings.

Adolescents after puberty will commonly demand cross-sex hormones: testosterone for girls, estrogen and progesterone for boys. These hormones serve to cement them in their chosen cross-sex identity. Girls will often seek to conceal their breasts by using a binder, a highly elasticated tube

²² Zinnia Jones, “‘That was Dysphoria?’ 8 Signs and Symptoms of Indirect Gender Dysphoria,” The Orbit, September 10, 2013, <https://the-orbit.net/zinniajones/2013/09/that-was-dysphoria-8-signs-and-symptoms-of-indirect-gender-dysphoria/>.

²³ The charity *childline* says on its website: “Your gender identity isn’t always the same as the gender you were given at birth,” <https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/your-feelings/sexual-identity/gender-identity/> (accessed October 1, 2022). The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children website says: “... some people may identify as a boy or a girl, while others may find neither of these terms feel right for them, and identify as neither or somewhere in the middle.” <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/sex-relationships/gender-identity/> (accessed October 1, 2022).

²⁴ Sharon James, “It’s All About Me!” Foundations, Spring 2021, “It’s All About Me!” - Ministry In A Therapeutic Culture - News stories - Affinity.

²⁵ Donna M, “I Act; Therefore I Am. Dear Trans Kids: Stop Feeling and Start Thinking,” New Discourses, June 2, 2021, <https://newdiscourses.com/2021/06/dear-trans-kids-stop-feeling-start-thinking/>.

²⁶ For example, Ollie Pike, “Jamie: A Transgender Cinderella Story,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_9F0RZUslc (accessed October 1, 2022).

²⁷ Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing our Daughters* (Washington: Regnery, 2020).



which compresses the breasts. While worn, these restrict breathing so much that it can make physical activity difficult. The inability to take a deep breath to cough can lead to build-up of fluid in the lungs, which can become infected. Persistent use of binders can even result in rib fractures.²⁸ After puberty, some may go on to demand surgical modification. For girls, a mastectomy, or for boys, prosthetic breasts. Facial cosmetic surgery may be used, particularly for boys. Fewer go as far as surgery to the genitals to try to create the appearance of the opposite sex, but such treatments will usually involve infertility and reduced sexual function, and these surgeries are becoming increasingly normalized.

Amid all this, it is tragic that children and young people are often robbed of proper diagnosis and treatment of other serious underlying mental health conditions. Such conditions are not resolved by transition. One study commissioned by the Tavistock Clinic found that transitioning made them worse.²⁹ The results of that study were not made public.

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

The church must be at the forefront of a response to this devastating trend with biblical and reasonable wisdom. The following are some suggestions:

1. *Teach children and young people the truth about the human body.* We should respect the wondrous complementarity of male and female bodies. The resources produced by the British organization Lovewise,³⁰ for example, can be used to teach children about this in an age-appropriate way.

2. *Resist exaggerated stereotypes.* Children and young people are all individuals. We should encourage and nurture all their various aptitudes and gifts, while shepherding them into biblical notions of manhood and womanhood.

3. *Understand the false claims of gender ideology.* Gender ideology has no objective or scientific basis. Youngsters need to understand the truth before they get swept into online influencer communities. I explain more in my book, *Gender Ideology: What Do Christians Need to Know?*, which is written at a level suitable for discussing with teens.³¹

In addition to teaching youngsters the truth about gender ideology, we should also encourage them to treat others kindly, no matter what they believe. Bullying is always wrong! The flip side is that they should not be forced to agree with the beliefs or actions of others. Disagreement is not hatred. Their own conscientious or religious convictions should be respected.

4. *Find out what is being taught in schools.* Many schools are going far beyond what they are legally required to teach on these issues.³² Ask questions. Get involved. Be aware that there are support groups of parents, professionals, and others who are concerned about the false claims of gender ideology. Some non-Christian networks include Genspect (genspect.org), Transgender Trend (transgendertrend.com), and 4th Wave Now (4thwavenow.com).

5. *Protect children and teens from unrestricted internet access.* Caring parents would never open the door of their home to violent predators, but they may not realize that

²⁸ Hugh McLean, "Health Consequences of Chest Binding," FTM Procedures, December 18, 2014, <https://ftmtopsurgery.ca/blog/ftm-faq/health-consequences-chest-binding/>.

²⁹ Heather Brunsell-Evans, Michele Moore, eds, *Inventing Transgender Children and Young People* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 46.

³⁰ Lovewise, <https://lovewise.org.uk/> (accessed October 1, 2022).

³¹ Sharon James, *Gender Ideology: What do Christians Need to Know?* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2019). This book has also been translated into German, Italian, Spanish and Romanian.

³² "Groomed: How Schools Sexualise Your Children," June 29, 2022, <https://youtu.be/XA07ta2tJpQ>.

social media exposes their children and teens to those who may be influencing them towards potentially life-changing damaging procedures.

6. *Be aware of the signs that a child or young person is getting caught up in the “trans-trend.”* There may be changes in clothing or hairstyle towards the opposite sex. Boys may try to “tuck” or hide their genitals; girls may try to “bind” their breasts. Youngsters may experiment with different names, they may ask to visit a “gender specialist,” and some may try to obtain hormones over the internet.

7. *Find out if they are distressed because of other underlying issues.* Are they suffering depression, anxiety, or eating disorders? Are there social or learning difficulties? Are there difficulties with relationships? Is there a pattern of alcohol or drug use?

8. *Remain measured and calm.* Do not overreact. Use open-ended questions to try to find out when these feelings began to occur. Remember that adolescents often experience rapidly shifting ideas and emotions. Do not “over-empathize,” which could reinforce an idea that might pass over.

9. *Do not be pressured into calling the child or young person by an opposite sex name or “preferred gendered pronouns.”* Remember that in the majority of cases, someone grows out of gender confusion post-puberty. Be kind, but firm. Some who have undergone sex reassignment, and later regretted it, testify that when others gave in to pressure to call them by their preferred name and pronouns, this reinforced what they later regret. Do not be intimidated. Too many parents are pushed into going along with the lie. Many are blackmailed by false and inflated statistics about suicides, which are routinely repeated.³³ Remember that transition does not address what are often serious underlying comorbid problems. Such problems do not go away, indeed, they are often made worse.³⁴

10. *Be cautious about who you look to for “professional” help.* Many psychologists and psychiatrists may be far too hasty in advocating transition. “Gender therapists” and “gender specialists” will probably be committed to gender ideology. Try to find a mental health professional who is competent to address underlying issues without jumping to the conclusion that all will be fixed by transition.

CONCLUSION

Too many children and teens are being swept along by the fictitious theory of gender ideology. They are being influenced and deceived by activists and online influencers. Many are turned against their own bodies. Many are turned against their own parents, the people who (usually) care for them most in this world.

Too many parents and professionals have been swept along into allowing children and teens to be used as human guinea pigs in a vast, untested medical experiment. In an age when there is fury about animal experimentation, it is remarkable that some do not blink at the idea of sterilising and mutilating healthy young people. But for children and young people who transition, there is lasting physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual harm. Many may be robbed of their prospects of motherhood or fatherhood.

In what other area would we allow children below the age of consent the freedom to make life changing decisions? In what other medical field is self-diagnosis the only ground for prescription of medication or referral to radical surgery?

Future generations will look back and marvel at the wholesale abuse of children performed in the name of a false ideology. Many people know in their hearts that this is wrong, but they are terrified of the consequences of taking a stand.

We must tell the truth. We must refuse to tell lies. ✕

³³ Kathleen Stock, K, *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism* (London: Fleet, 2021), 223–229. False statistics are also put out with regard to hate crimes and murders.

³⁴ As mentioned earlier, one study, hidden away by the Tavistock Clinic, showed that mental health outcomes for youngsters were worse, not better, after transition. Brunsell-Evans, Moore, “Inventing Transgender Children and Young People,” 46.

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Leading with Who You Are:

The Misunderstood Calling of the Submitted Wife

When I first started to read the Bible, twenty-five years ago, I had a deep fear of it and of God’s people.¹ I knew the Bible could change me. I was a lesbian feminist activist professor and I was not interested in change.

The church I first attended was pastored by Ken Smith, a Reformed Presbyterian pastor who was in his mid 70s. I was in this church because I trusted him. Our friendship was two years in the making at the time I stepped foot in church.²

In a Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, there is no way to dodge the word of God. There was never a Lord’s Day where the pastor took some time off to let the interpretive dance group use their gifts. Not even in worship music can you find reprieve: the word of God was surround-sound, not only in the expositively preached word but also in song, where Psalms are sung a cappella and exclusively. I learned later that something called the Regulative Principle of Worship maintained this faithful consistency.³

¹This paper was originally delivered to a women’s conference in March 2022. While the institution’s name has been removed, we believe this is not the first time that an acceptable and requested paper topic in 2019 became contemptible in 2022. At the very least, we think it is important to note the lines being redrawn.

²I describe this in *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor’s Journal into Christian Faith*. Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant Publications, 2012.

³The Regulative Principle of Worship understands worship of God as regulated by Scripture. Embraced by Reformed and Presbyterian churches, it declares that whatever is not commanded in Scripture is prohibited in worship. While there are differences in how this principle is practiced among different branches of Reformed and Presbyterian churches, it is generally contrasted from the Normative Principle of Worship which welcomes anything that is not prohibited in scripture. The Regulative Principle of Worship sets not only a barrier to unbiblical worship practices, but it also sets a holy aesthetic in the church. As Pastor Barry York teaches, worship regulated by Scripture in turn regulates God’s people. While by no means a “magic bullet,” the Regulative Principle of Worship provides a much more useful tool to discern the seriousness of a conflict than that offered by “theological triage” concept (Gavin Ortland, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On: The Case for Theological Triage* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020). Using the triage method has relegated all divisions in the church to a third tier, constantly deferring things that don’t rank. But the Regulative Principle of Worship gives primary attention to anything that is out of God’s order. Under the Regulative Principle of Worship, human reason does not dictate priority for confrontation; God’s word does.

The first time I heard Psalm 113 was in church. I took great offense to it, and because God used my offense for my good, this Psalm became a turning point in my life. It was 1999, and I was sporting a butch haircut and extra piercings in my right ear — because back in the day, left was right (straight), and right was wrong (gay). I stood in a pew in the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church seeking a God who would accept me as I was. Floy Smith, the pastor’s wife, stood at my side. Floy, a woman who could bridge worlds, brushed me with her shoulder before we started to sing. “God is making you His beautiful trophy, my dear,” she whispered in my ear, the one with the extra piercings. My reflex was recoil. Pastor Ken Smith told us to open our Psalters to Psalm 113A. From his open Bible, he read the Psalm through once, so we could get a lay of the land.

Like many things that have caught me off guard, this Psalm started on what I perceived to be safe ground. A song of praise to a God who must stoop to examine his creation: he lowers himself to survey the stars, the moon, and the sun. He makes no bones about his authority over creation, and then he makes dead bones live. He tells the mountains to stand, and they obey without backtalk. He even bends low enough to build up men and women, extending love to the loveless, dignity to the deprived, and family to the refugee. I jumped in with mouth wide open:

Praise the Lord’s name, praise the Lord!
Praise Him servants of the Lord;
May the Lord’s Name blessed be
Now and to eternity
Now and to eternity.

Voices raised in perfect four-part harmony.

The people in this church had been singing Psalms together for years — decades for some. Many sang from memory, in perfect sync. It was captivating. The Psalm continued:

Dawn to dusk from east to west,
Let the Lord’s great name be blessed
Over nations lifted high,
LORD Your glory crowns the sky!
LORD Your glory crowns the sky!

The intensity of what “praising” God entails hit hard. (Psalm-singing is different from human-composed praise and worship music, with its repeated, contextless, emotional phrase to which you could attach absolutely anything). What does it mean that God is above the nations? All the nations? Isn’t that dangerous Christian nationalism? What happened to the separation of church and state?

The Psalm goes on to make big claims about God being the Lord and being separate from his creation. I was a Unitarian Universalist at this point in my life, and “my” God was one with the universe, not separate from it. I loathed hierarchy — except the hierarchy that put me in charge of my students, of course. I believed that spirituality is internal and that all creatures were sacred. My cultish affection for Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha* had never dissipated since high school. Psalm 113 was so black and white. As a queer critical-theorist and soon-to-be tenured radical, I recoiled against any “binary opposition.” The Psalm went on:

Who is like the Lord our God alone?
High in heav’n the Lord’s enthroned;
But he condescends to know
Things in heav’n and earth below.

Things in heav'n and earth below.

I pondered these words. Why is worship so exclusive to this church? I had always thought of worship as a serene walk by the Ithaca gourds or Murphy's Island. The Psalm goes on:

From the dust he lifts the poor
Makes the needy grieve no more
Those he raised up from the pit
With his people's princes sit
With his people's princes sit.

I pondered this. Does God lift up the poor? Not all of the poor? What about the people left behind? And from what "pit" does God lift people? Poverty? Oppression? The pit of hell? And what does "his people" mean? Do these people really believe that God sends some people to hell and spares others? The idea that God does not love everyone the same seemed so unfair, even prejudiced. I was glad that we only had one stanza left to go. How much worse could it get? I mused.

He the barren woman takes
and a joyful mother makes;
In her home she finds reward.
Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!
Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!⁴

The crescendo verse brought everything to a place of pure panic. I choked mid-verse and stopped singing after "in her home she finds reward." Pastor Smith closed the psalm with this reminder: "If we look to God in repentance and place our hope for salvation in Christ alone, we are ransomed by the blood of Christ. We become sons and daughters of the King! Christian men and women serving God together

according to God's pattern for the sexes."

Whoa! Good grief! What in the world did he mean by this? I wondered. Does he really think that there is a "unique" way to be a woman in the world, separate from being a man? I believed that men and women were interchangeable in all ways. I believed the diametric opposite of what this Psalm proclaimed.

I had warred against patriarchy for decades. As the daughter of a feminist, I took up my destiny with pride. In addition to my lesbian identity, my feminist identity grounded me in everything I valued. I was not a man-hater. I had women friends who were sexually partnered with men. In college I had boyfriends. And I appreciated male-female relationships that valued unity, interdependence, and mutual service. I lamented male-female relationships that called for a woman's submission, even if voluntary. Indeed, my feminist commitments declared any male-female sexual relationship that rejected sameness and called for a wife's submission to her husband as foundational to rape culture. What God called good, I called rape.

The whole Psalm got under my skin, but that last stanza was unthinkable. "In her home she finds reward"? Absurd! How could anyone find reward as a homemaker where no one can regard and celebrate her work? How could the world appreciate her gifts? Where could she exercise her voice? I even struggled to understand what this verse could mean. Would anyone aspire to work at home as a homemaker? Wasn't that the 1950s default employed to keep women enslaved to men? Not even my

own mother was a "homemaker." She had a job that kept her away from home for all the years I could remember. Wasn't "homemaking" a sign of failure? When asked, "what do you want to be when you grow up?" what girl says, "homemaker"? Apart from this small church, I realized I did not know anyone on planet Earth who was a homemaker.

After the service, I was still mulling over this verse. And so, I asked the pastor's wife. And then I asked the elders' wives. And then I asked some other trusted women in the church. No one apologized for this verse.

Instead, Floy and the other women told me that every word of God is good. This line spoke of real women reflecting their relationship to Jesus by their resemblance to Jesus. It captures the covenant promise God gave to Abraham and Sarah (Gen 17:15-21; Isa 54). My friends told me plainly that a mother finding reward in her home portrays God's compassion on the solitary. They told me that Psalm 113 highlights the complementarity of husbands and wives in a harmony of obedience that pointed to the second coming of Christ. Floy, the pastor's wife, said that this verse does not prohibit women from having a job outside of the home, but it does mean that any

outside job needs to build up and not tear down the family. I pondered this. I had colleagues at the University who lived apart from their husbands and children for six months of the year. I had one colleague whose daughters and husband lived halfway around the globe. My colleagues at the University often chose professoriate over progeny. I pondered this.

Floy suggested that I situate this verse in the context of the creation ordinance — Genesis 1:26-28 and the fall of man — Genesis 3:16. Scripture interprets scripture. The gospel is in the garden. (Aside: these women in this church were readers — they were biblically literate and they understood how to handle a text. Apart from the English department, I had never met a population of people so committed to reading. I wonder if future generations will say that about us?)

And so, with the help of faithful Christian women I started to study these passages. I studied Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." I beheld the dignity of this verse: that both men and women derive their image from God. The order of creation made the point: the sexes are



⁴The Book of Psalms for Worship. Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant Publications, 2009.

equal in essence and different in social roles. Everything in my body and brain screamed, “Wrong!” O Even so, a hole in my heart craved covering by God and the covenant of church and family.

Then my friends walked me through Genesis 3:16, God’s curse on Eve: “To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception. In pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.’” This verse was not easy to untangle. It became more manageable when I read it next to the parallel verse in Genesis 4:7: “Sin lies at the door, and its desire is for you,” God tells Cain. “But you should rule over it.” The literary echoes exposed how sin distorted everything — including relationships between husbands and wives. It started to make sense that sin’s entrance into the world produced a collision of wills within marriage. I wondered: which story is true? Is a wife’s submission to her husband part of the blessing of creation or part of the curse?

Over time, as the Holy Spirit was working on my heart and mind, I started to see the logic in God’s love and God’s order. And if God’s love came first, then God’s law could not be some 1970’s rallying cry or some 1950’s cultural trap. Instead, God’s law presented itself as a logical interpretation of what total depravity reveals about my heart’s gravitational pull. The sin that Adam, our federal head, imputed to all would vex our will to do what God wants — both personally and relationally. And what does God want? He wants his first fruits — men and women — to cherish and triumph in his creation ordinance and his created order. Even as I railed against Psalm 113, some deep part of me

recognized God’s word as good — truly, uniquely, separately, good. God’s word was real as rain to me, even as I tried to push it away.

Psalm 113 started a war in my heart that needed to be fought to the death. If the creation order came before the fall of Adam and not because of it, then a wife’s submission in the Lord to her godly husband is part of the creation order, like it or not. (And I didn’t). This meant that biblical marriage was both good and normative.

What did this mean for me as a lesbian in a committed relationship? Was I just an outsider looking in? What does this mean for Christian women who are single? Psalm 113 raised questions that demanded answers.

I first tried to answer these questions from within the text of the Bible. Psalm 113 pressed me to see my lesbianism in the light of both scripture and feminism. I did not just find women sexually attractive; I found the whole worldview of queer theory and third-wave feminism inspiring, meaningful, and life-giving. I believed in a world where distinctions must be eliminated so that the sacred and divine nature of people could be finally realized. But Psalm 113 said something else entirely. If Psalm 113 was true, then I was heading in the wrong direction. Like a cancer patient weighing therapies, I feared the cure as much as the disease.

Each time we sang Psalm 113 in corporate worship, I relived this internal war. Each time I sang Psalm 113, it exposed something new about my priorities and values. When Psalm singing is part of your

daily Bible reading, Scripture sings with sublime sovereignty.

Lesbianism reflected how I felt. But as a thinking person, I realized that lesbianism was more than a set of feelings and desires. What does my lesbianism mean, both biblically and culturally? Can a person be a lesbian and be a Christian, in desire or deed? No. Lesbianism in light of Scripture is a rejection of the cosmology (the nature of the universe) of creation. Calling lesbianism good meant denying that God planted the seeds of the gospel in the garden. That made me think. If lesbianism in light of Scripture is a rejection of the creation order, then I cannot have my lesbian identity and Christ.

While meditating on this Psalm, I considered how my homosexuality was tightly woven into certain feminist predispositions that, while not sinful in themselves, served me well as a lesbian. I exuded boldness and strength rather than gentleness and kindness. Christians are, of course, called to be bold and strong, but the ease with which I applied these attributes became something of a set up for me, a set up for sin and not submission. My feminist worldview valued boldness and strength and regarded gentleness and kindness as weak, reserved for only safe spaces, and dangerous in any patriarchal hierarchy. I pondered this. Again, friends from church were there at my side, reminding me that the fruit of the Spirit calls for “love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22–23). Christians sure are a mixed bag of unusual virtues, I thought.

I went back and forth like this for months, asking the same questions to both of my

communities — my church community and my lesbian one. I respected women from both places, and I listened intently and weighed their answers. But always after talking with my Christian friends, we would pray. Or sing a Psalm. I straddled two incommensurable worlds.

They represented not just different sides of a coin, but different coins. We were not all in the same forest looking at different trees from different angles. We were in different forests altogether.

It was shocking to realize that my lesbianism was truly a sin. How in the world does one do battle with something that just feels like normal life? My friends from church talked about biblical patterns of addition and subtraction, about repentance and grace. Seeing my lesbianism as God sees it required embracing God’s intent for me to live out all the attributes of the fruit of the Spirit, not just the ones that I liked. I started to pray. I started to pray that God would make a godly woman. I stared at myself in the mirror as I prayed this prayer the first time, my butch haircut and piercings mocking my words. I told no one about this prayer.

The women in the church continued to encourage me to search the scriptures for answers. They firmly believed that the Bible was a living book and that it knew me better than I knew myself. They told me that godly womanhood was not a cookie-cutter recipe where women lose their unique identity, but rather a particular application of God’s grace to me, with the word of truth molding the clay of my heart. The women in my church told me that God intended to make me a godly woman and that I indeed would recognize myself as he molded the clay of my heart and life.

"God used the offense of the word of God for the good of my soul."

And so it was that Psalm 113 changed my life. It changed my life through its audacious offense. Its offenses drove me to commit my life to Jesus. God used the offense of the word of God for the good of my soul.

I broke up with my lesbian partner, and we started the painful process of dividing up a life — dogs and dishes and a house. My church friends carried me through this. They did not meddle, but they also did not leave me to figure out all of this by myself.

About a year after my conversion, I noticed my affections changing. I started to embrace my role as a single Christian woman and church member. I did not stop cold turkey feeling like a lesbian. Not at all. But I did register lesbian desires as sinful acts in need of repentance, not morally neutral attributes of homosexual orientation. No one told me to “pray the gay away.” Because every sermon told me to drive a fresh nail into every sin every day, no one needed to.

I started to commit to memory the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Q. 35: What is sanctification?

A: Sanctification is the work of God’s

free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God and are enabled more and more to die until sin and live unto righteousness.

Instead of lesbianism being who I was, I now understood it as both a lack of righteousness and a willful transgressive action. We repent of sin by hating it, killing it, turning from it, but also by “adding” the virtue of God’s word. It is light that changes darkness. We mortify and we vivify.⁵ I realized that Christians are given a new nature — they do not have competing natures within them. Colossians 3:10 puts it like this: “you have put off the old man with his deeds and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge, according to the image of [God].” This verse told me that if I am a Christian, lesbianism is part of my biography, not my nature, regardless of how I feel inside. Progressive sanctification is real.

I poured my heart out to God, asking that he help me become a godly woman. Floy suggested I look around for young mothers in the church who need help and offer to make some meals or do some dishes. I took her advice.

My only experience with babies and small children at the time was what I learned in their homes. I had never held a baby in my life until this time. Nonetheless, I discovered that I loved helping new mothers. I soon found myself at home in the world of holding babies and entertaining toddlers and cooking meals for families. I learned so much during that time. I learned that I

enjoyed watching children grow. It seemed so strange to me that young mothers wanted my company. Some even wanted my advice. These women wanted me — me! — to pray for them and sing Psalms to their children. I had no idea that I was a nurturing person, a gentle woman. I took up my role as an older friend with a glee that surprised me. I was fascinated by how their households worked, by how much went into keeping a home and homeschooling children.

After a while, God gave me another desire: to be a godly wife to a godly husband and to submit to him, to help him in his work, and, if God willed, to be a mother of children. Another year fraught with strife and turmoil followed,⁶ and then I met Kent Butterfield. The Lord knitted our hearts together, and Kent proposed marriage.⁷ I have now been married to Kent for over two decades and the Lord has used Kent more than any other person on earth to show me God’s love and purpose. Kent is my husband, but he is also my pastor. No one had ever wanted to protect me before the Lord brought Kent into my life.

Our engagement forced many decisions. One was what to do with my professional life. I wanted to be Kent’s helper, but was that what God wanted for me? Was it right or wrong to leave my profession? I was also

a tenured professor at a tier-two research institution. Would it not be a greater win for the Kingdom of God to have a tenured Christian professor in the world than to have another homemaker in the church?

At the time the Lord brought Kent into my life, I stood at the mouth of three divergent paths, three opposing life directions, and three mutually exclusive options that would unmistakably shape me. I could return to Syracuse University as a tenured professor of English. I could stay at Geneva College and accept a position in administrative leadership, likely becoming the academic dean. Or I could marry Kent Butterfield and become a homemaker and a church planter’s wife. The first path was familiar. The second path was recognizable. The third path was unimaginable. Immediately, well-meaning people started to weigh in.

How could I turn away from the university work the Lord had already prepared me to do? Couldn’t I see God’s amazing timing in this, preparing me to take up my role as a senior tenured professor and Christian in a powerful institution, exercising influence and speaking truth to power? How did I know God was calling me to marry Kent? Isn’t it sinful not to use my gifts? What about the books I would never (presumably) write? What about the life of

⁶ I discuss this in *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor’s Journey into Christian Faith*. (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant Publications, 2012).

⁷ I share this personal history with you not because I am trying to win an argument using my personal feelings and experiences. It is the Word of God alone that witnesses to the truth. I dated men in college. In graduate school, when I met my first lesbian lover, I felt like I had come home to myself. And then I met the Lord and started to do battle with the sin of lesbianism. I realize some people reading my story may be quick to dismiss it, since I “only” lived as a lesbian for a decade. I’m grateful that the Lord gave me a way of escape and that I was not trapped in that sin for any longer than I was. I narrowly escaped and have the Lord and my church to thank for that. I am daily grateful that the Lord brought me to repentance. I realize that for some faithful Christians, the battle against homosexual lust is harder and longer than mine. The Lord knows how hard desires of the flesh are, and how it feels like you have a civil war going on inside of you. The Apostle Paul gives us these words of comfort: “the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Gal 5:17). In other words, the battle is part of the victory. My generation of lesbianism came out of the paradigm reflected by the late poet Adrienne Rich — that heterosexuality was compulsory and therefore many women’s lesbian lives were erased. She made a full case for this in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” originally published in 1980 in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986, reissued 1994).



the mind that I would never (presumably) have? What about the audience of students who would never (presumably) hear my voice? And what about me? As one sister put it, “Do you really need a Ph.D. in hermeneutics to change diapers?”

The Lord led me to marry Kent and become a homemaker and a church planter’s wife.

Yes, it was hard to give up my professional life. Yes, I needed to learn new skills to be a church planter’s wife. During the early days of the church plant, my first job Lord’s Day morning was to clean the restrooms at the Purcellville Community Center, where our church met for worship. Saturday night at the community center was Open Men’s Basketball. Enough said. I took up my lot in Psalm 84:10-style — “I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, then to dwell in the tents of wickedness.”

I was thirty-nine years old when I married Kent and unable to bear children. The Lord allowed us to adopt four children, including two teenagers out of foster care. Adopting children, especially older

children with histories of abuse, required new skills, greater faith, and firmly solidified the vital importance of being a homemaker. Our older children were in perpetual crisis and keeping them safe was a fulltime job.

Today, the ages of my children span sixteen to thirty-four. The older children broke the cycle that had held them in dangerous crisis and the younger children are thriving as strong Christians and covenant members of the church. Today, I spend my days homeschooling my two youngest children, being a helper to Kent, and teaching high school English Literature and Writing in my classical Christian homeschool co-op. I have spent joyful years with my grandson, even homeschooling him during the covid school shutdown. I have also managed to write a few books and engage the culture on the frontlines of a few pivotal cultural issues.

Taking care of my children provides a weight, a way to balance and measure the other good things to which God calls me. My husband provides a covering and boundary. God has blessed and imbued both husband

and children in such a way that my life has balance and momentum, boundary and covering. Far from holding me back, my role as a submitted wife to a godly husband has given me liberty and purpose.

Psalm 113 has carried me full circle. Decades ago, I railed against patriarchy and the Bible, seeing submission of any kind as a recipe for abuse. Today, I believe with all of my heart and mind that the safest place in the world for a woman is as a member of a Bible-believing church, protected and covered by God through the means of faithful elders and pastors and, if God wills, under the protective care of a godly husband.

My life is open to scrutiny. One of the fair criticisms of my choosing the role of a submitted wife over and against returning to Syracuse to serve as an English professor is that in doing so, I am showing my support of biblical patriarchy. Guilty as charged. But let’s be clear: I do not support biblical patriarchy because of the belief that men are good. I embrace biblical patriarchy because men are not good (Jer 17:9). Because men

are not good, I am grateful to encourage and stand behind a godly redeemed man who defends and protects the church and his family against ravaging wolves.

When I was first asked to address this topic, I was charged with the task of answering these questions: What is the thing that has been all consuming in your life, your passion? What is the thing God has placed uniquely in your life to draw you to Him that you can now use to lead in your area of influence? I was told that the frame of my paper was “Leading from my Home.”

But before I was able to deliver my paper, I was told that some were “triggered” by my title. It was too narrow. What about the single ladies? Or the widows? Or the abuse survivors? The concern was that my talk would make people feel left out. Let’s reason through this together. The Body of Christ has no second-class citizens. Indeed, those who are blessed to be the wife of a godly husband have great bandwidth to serve widows and orphans, and to lock arms with single sisters who join our

“In God’s economy,
the creation
ordinance is at the
center of the gospel,
not the periphery”

family as sisters, aunts, and grandmothers. Those who are single have more time and freedom to serve the church. The church is the family of God, and there are no second-class citizens in God’s family.

So if you are offended by a lecture that calls you to appreciate the often-misunderstood calling of a submitted wife, then I am gently calling you to examine your heart and repent. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about you — or me. It is not about

affirming your calling — or affirming mine. It is about God. And in God’s economy, the creation ordinance is at the center of the gospel, not the periphery. Children are not a trifling consequence of individual people living out their “sexual orientation.” The Christian family is about “the kingdom of our world ...becom[ing] the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 11:15).

You know me. You have seen me on the front line for the past decade. You have seen me deal with a mob of protesters. You know that I have written books and have faced the world’s hot anger. What you might not know is that everything I do — including my public work — is done under my husband’s covering and authority. It is done for the good of my family. In every public encounter, I am handing down a faith-legacy to my children. The world our children will inherit is fanatically deceived. It is a world where, in just the past year alone, a candidate for the Supreme Court cannot define the meaning of the word “woman”

while a man can win the NCAA women’s swim championship. The Bible is always true, even when it offends, and it is certainly truer than the mass hysteria of our world.

I conclude with my sincere prayers and Christian love, knowing that God’s providence is meant for your good, even God’s hard providences. I want to encourage you and invite you to look afresh at your calling. Are you a biblically married woman? Then submit to your husbands in the Lord and open your arms and homes wide and include your single sisters as the aunts and grandmothers of the church. Are you single? Do you desire a husband? Then pray that the Lord will make you a submissive wife to the godly husband that God himself has chosen. Be productive in your single years as you wait upon the Lord. Are you an older single woman? Then support your Titus 2 calling to encourage younger women to love and respect their husbands well and so adorn the doctrines of God (Titus 2:1–10). To God be the glory! ✕

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Truth Be Told:

Empirical Research Regarding Complementarian Institutional Vitality

INTRODUCTION

Untangling truth from error was first required in the Garden of Eden, where Satan posed to Eve, “Did God actually say?” (Gen 3: 1). The Psalmist noted living during a time when “there is nothing true in what they say. . .” (Ps 5:9). In our postmodern era, verifying truth is both essential and difficult. As Nel Noddings has observed “Most postmodern thinkers have abandoned the Enlightenment quest for absolute truth” accepting instead “local truth” often interpreted as “my truth” and “your truth.”¹

Trust is derived from truth. The etymology of the English word “trust” is derived from the word “truth.” In our postmodern era, verifying truth is essential. The Scriptures assert: “truth is in Jesus” (Eph 4:21). Jesus said to those “*who had believed Him*, if you abide in my word . . . you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn 8:31–32).

Scholarly literature pertaining to scriptural teaching on the roles of women has provided a varying story line.² Having traced the scholarly literature from seven decades, what began as a whisper in the 1950’s has become a roar in the 2020’s.³

¹Nel Noddings, *Philosophy of Education*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Boulder, CO: 2012), 77-78.

²For a full review of the literature on this subject, see chapter 2 in Linda Reed, “Theological and Practical Ministry Training for Women” in *Complementarian Higher Education: A Mixed Methods Study*, (Ed.D thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017), thesis accessed June 16, 2022 at <https://repository.sbts.edu/handle/10392/5470>.

³Ibid, chapter 2.

After CBMW published the Denver’s Statement in *Christianity Today* in 1989, the organization received over 1,000 positive responses. As Wayne Grudem recalled, “People would write us saying: I wept when I saw your ad. I didn’t know that people held this anymore.”⁴ It had become normal to assume no authority distinctions, rather, only servant leadership in the church.⁵

The new “truths” have been assumed to such an extent that institutional leaders have been told: If you hold to a complementarian position, your organization will die.⁶ Among Christian higher educational institutions in particular, an egalitarian point of view has been assumed to be necessary to sustain student enrollment. Christian higher education leaders face significant pressure to adjust to what is assumed to be “truth” in our times.

Recent educational research has revealed empirical data that counters the faltering enrollment storyline. Where once clarifying an identity statement towards a complementarian point of view was considered branding that institution towards institutional decline, empirical data from current higher education enrollment statistics has revealed this is simply not true. Utilizing the results of recent research of qualitative enrollment data from ATS member institutions across North America, this article argues that complementarian higher educational institutions are not dying off, but rather are numerically flourishing. When an

empirical, data-driven study reviewed twelve complementarian institutions, the research revealed these institutions’ enrollments, by and large, have increased over the past decade, and are currently the largest seminaries in North America.

Using additional data provided by Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) and Gordon Conwell Seminary, a study of denominational alignment revealed significant findings regarding complementarian denominational alignment.⁷

Most complementarians assume we are far outnumbered. But the data reveal overall complementarian institutional health, and calls for a shift in perspective. Contrary to commonly publicized opinions, the data reveal many men and women “vote with their feet” and enroll in complementarian seminaries and remain in complementarian denominations.

Craig Keener has stated the complementarian view is the minority.⁸ But recent research indicates God is being glorified in complementarian institutions that equip men and women to know Christ and make Him known. Many women, including notable authors, scholars, and students, hold a complementarian view as scriptural, complementary, and beautiful.

RESEARCH DESIGN OVERVIEW

The original design for this research

⁴Wayne Grudem, “Personal Reflections on the History of CBMW and the State of the Gender Debate,” *Journal of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 14, no. 1 (2009): 14.

⁵Margaret Kostenberger, *Jesus and the Feminists: Who Do They Say That He Is?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 160.

⁶Summary of words spoken to leaders of Heritage College and Seminary prior to institutional realignment, 2011.

⁷See data in Dr. Linda Reed thesis study completed in 2017.

⁸Among scholars, complementarianism is regarded as the “minority view” as noted by Craig Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 101.



was quantitative content analysis from institutional websites and catalogs, followed by qualitative interviews with twelve female directors of women's programs at complementarian higher educational institutions.⁹ The content collected was tabulated using nominal data which followed the guidance of Leedy and Ormrod,¹⁰ and used charts to quantify enrollment data and qualify complementarian doctrinal statements. This article focuses on the quantitative content analysis data from this year-long study.

The research process began with Grudem's delimitations, then extended to research on all 286 ATS member institutions. The research study then included a "satellite overview" of denominational alignment from data provided by the Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) and Gordon Conwell Seminary. These organizations provided charted statements of denominational identification as complementarian or egalitarian. The researcher has verified complementarian higher educational institutions by extracting and charting website doctrinal statements. From this research, the composite research documented numerous complementarian denominations, with fewer complementarian higher educational institutions. However, among these institutions, there were significant enrollments.

RESEARCH DELIMITATIONS

The research conducted was guided

⁹ Creswell and Plano-Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 81-86; and Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 95. For review of content analysis, methodology, analysis and reporting, see Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2013), 148-49.

¹⁰ *Practical Research*, 148-49.

initially by Wayne Grudem's list of "Two-Point Complementarian groups":

Other Two-Point Complementarian groups include several denominations or organizations that historically have been strongly truth-based and doctrinally diligent. Included in this group are the Evangelical Free Church of America, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and the more recently formed Sovereign Grace Ministries (formerly PDI). Several seminaries also fall in this category, such as Westminster Seminary (Philadelphia and California), Reformed Seminary (Jackson, Orlando and Charlotte), and Covenant Seminary in St. Louis, as well as Dallas Theological Seminary, the Master's Seminary, and now most or all of the Southern Baptist seminaries such as the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina.

Many Bible colleges also fall in this category, such as the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, and

Northwestern College in St. Paul, Minnesota, as well as some Reformed colleges, such as Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Tennessee. Thousands of independent churches and Bible churches across the United States also fall into this category.¹¹

The summary of the content analysis is clarified in the charts that follow. First, a review of the above delimited seminaries during the years 2009–2021.

SEMINARY GROWTH AND DECLINE AMONG INSTITUTIONS

If truth is in empirical data, conservative evangelical institutions of Christian higher education are bolstered by upholding biblical values.¹² In her research on America's largest seminaries, Chelsen Vicari found that students are most attracted to thriving "evangelical Protestant seminaries, a trend that hasn't changed much over the past twenty years."¹³ While Keener particularly views complementarian scholars as "the minority view,"¹⁴ the "grassroots movement of churches has called for a return to theological orthodoxy."¹⁵ The

¹¹ Wayne Grudem, *Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism: Biblical Responses to the Key Questions* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2006), 286–87. Two-point complementarians hold that men and women are equal in value but with different roles (1) in the home and (2) in the church.

¹² Chelsen Vicari, "What Are America's Largest Seminaries?" *The Aquila Report*, August 4, 2016, accessed February 17, 2017, <http://theaquilareport.com/what-are-americas-largest-seminaries/>. Vicari notes, "Among the smallest accredited Protestant seminaries in the nation are three [unstated] seminaries which offered . . . a menu of recycled 1960s-era liberation theology themes garnished with radical sexuality and gender studies [which] proved unappealing to prospective seminarians. . . . Two Cooperative Baptist Fellowship-associated seminaries that reveal another interesting contrast among evangelical institutions. Unlike the chart-topping conservative SBC-affiliated seminaries, the more liberal CBF-affiliated Baptist Theological Seminary of Richmond counted 42 full-time students and Baptist Seminary of Kentucky had only 31 full-time students in 2015-16. In 2006 Dr. Russell Moore, then senior vice president and dean at Southern, predicted CBF would fail because of 'the disaster of CBF's seminaries and divinity schools,' according to a *Baptist Press News report*. 'Unlike SBC seminaries, which are held accountable by the congregations of the Southern Baptist Convention, the CBF seminaries and divinity schools are accountable only to a donor base of nostalgic Baptist liberals.' However, the consistency in seminary choices over the past twenty years corroborates most full-time students called to ministry prefer orthodox Christianity to liberal trend followers."

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives*, 101.

¹⁵ Jason Duesing and Thomas White, "Neanderthals Chasing Bigfoot? The State of the Gender Debate in the Southern Baptist Convention," *JBW* 12, no. 2 (2007): 10.

“there has been a momentous shift to students choosing to attend an institution with a conservative, and even a complementarian alignment . . .”

tensions between the churches, and the seminaries which educate the leaders of those churches, has in several cases resulted in academic realignment.¹⁶

Strong evangelical seminaries are growing. Building on Andy Rowell’s 2009 research on “The Largest seminaries in North America” and Chelsen Vicari’s study of “America’s Largest Seminaries,”¹⁷ research was conducted using ATS enrollment data from 2016 through 2021.¹⁸ The data revealed all-time highs in enrollment at complementarian seminaries such as The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Southwestern, and Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. ATS enrollment data at the present time reveals all six Southern Baptist Seminaries are numerically thriving.¹⁹ While some observers, such as David Dockery, attribute this growth to being “more denominational specific,”²⁰ Canadian scholars and others are regularly crossing both borders and denominational distinctives to enroll in these institutions.²¹

Every one of the twelve complementarian seminaries listed by Wayne Grudem is found in the top twenty-five seminaries worldwide. The Full Time Enrollment (FTE) results among these ATS member institutions support Chelsen Vicari’s research that there has been a momentous shift to students choosing to attend an institution with a conservative, and even a complementarian alignment (see Table 2).

The evidence reveals complementarian doctrinal statements are not hindering seminary growth. Those with documented complementarian statements are noted in Table 1 with an asterisk.²² Concordia Seminary and the Seventh Day Adventist seminary also document complementarian statements on their institutional websites, and are also within the top twenty-five enrollments.

Numbers alone cannot tell the whole story of an institution’s health or decline. But they do provide an empirical starting point for this analysis. See Table 1.

TABLE 1. TRENDS IN ENROLLMENT FROM 2009–2021 FOR ATS SEMINARIES BY FTE ENROLLMENT²³

	2009	2012	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
*Southern Bapt. Theo. Seminary	1364	1424	1438	1593.3	1702.3	1731	1775	1924	1936
*Midwestern Baptist Seminary	NA	337	731	1011.3	1120	1214	1363	1495	1635
*Southeastern Bapt. Theo. Sem.	1430	1447	1067	1593.7	1602.3	1417	1393	1758	1180
Asbury	781	755	1189	1187.1	1209.9	1247	1231	1149	1150
*Dallas Theo. Seminary	1108	1057	1059	1133.7	1144.2	1111	1135	1134	1117
*Southwestern Bapt. Theo. Sem.	1477	1241	1356	1393.7	1392.6	1522	1414	1306	1105
Fuller Seminary	1940	1708	1542	1499	1319.3	1257	1159	1134	1077
*New Orleans Bapt. Sem.	656	1290	815	843.1	909	872	839	732	768
*Golden Gate Gateway	772	667	705	632.5	634.2	533	664	671	747
Seventh Day Adv	566	605	695	659.1	711.5	745	713	682	644
Gordon Conwell	1037	1069	973	900	NA	827	789	699	633
*Master’s Sem.	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	598
*Westminster Theo. Sem.	NA	420	385	364.7	473.1	516	565	485	590
Talbot School of Theo.	604	541	489	462	452.0	591	576	598	560
Duke Divinity School	517	588	619	621.8	542.7	537	492	530	523
Trinity Evan. Div. School	908	848	755	798	759	679	642	576	491
Denver Sem.	479	479	424	469.9	487.7	454	424	431	460
Western Sem.	NA	422	424	418.4	439.5	411	418	566	457
*Moody Theo. Sem.	NA	NA	458	482	503.0	354	354	379	448
*Reformed Theo. Sem.	584	561	548	535.9	519.6	535	533	419	429
Tyndale Seminary	NA	339	369	394.7	409.8	429	418	431	393
Concordia Seminary (MO)	450	441	420	481.7	429.9	350	360	368	377
*Covenant Theo. Sem.	451	NA	363	339.6	351.4	342	337	378	345
Luther Seminary	548	548	357	327	291	309	317	351	330
Ashland Theo. Seminary	473	360	399	335	298.9	240	160	137	143
Princeton Sem.	578	500	545	550.8	487.5	432	356	344	322
Bethel Seminary	649	405	266	278.2	NA	264	229	228	108

¹⁶ Duesing and White, “Neanderthals Chasing Bigfoot?” 5-19. This was also the case at my own institution, Heritage College and Seminary, Cambridge, Ontario, Canada.

¹⁷ Vicari, “What Are America’s Largest Seminaries?”

¹⁸ The Association of Theological Schools, “Member Schools,” accessed February 13, 2017, <http://www.ats.edu/member-schools/member-school-list>.

¹⁹ The Association of Theological Seminaries, “Member Schools” Vicari, “What are America’s Largest Seminaries?” observes, “While all of the ten largest seminaries in the country are evangelical Protestant, it’s interesting that half of those schools are Southern Baptist-affiliated. Five of the six theological seminaries associated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) are among the top ten largest in the country . . . Princeton Theological Seminary has seen 30 percent fewer full-time enrolled students.”

²⁰ Daniel Silliman, “Facing Financial Challenges, TEDS Cuts Faculty Positions,” *Christianity Today*, April 12, 2022. Accessed August 10, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/april/teds-financial-trouble-crisis-perrin-faculty-cuts.html>.

²¹ As an American serving with my husband in Canada, we are invited to speak at the Canada Club at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. We are aware of numerous individuals taking their M.Div. and doctoral training at conservative evangelical institutions, mainly SBC schools, in the U.S. Sadly, we often also lose future Canadian leaders.

²² For full review of each institution’s doctrinal statement, see chapter 4 in Linda Reed, “Theological and Practical Ministry Training for Women in Complementarian Higher Education,” Ed.D thesis, (Southern Seminary, 2017). See access footnote 4.

²³ Data for 2009 from Andy Rowell, “The Largest seminaries in North America,” accessed September 12, 2017, http://www.andyrowell.net/andy_rowell/2010/09/the-22-largest-seminaries-in-north-america.html. Data for 2012 from Andy Rowell, “The Largest Seminaries: Fall 2012 enrollment data for Association of Theological Schools, May 13, 2013, accessed September 12, 2017, http://www.andyrowell.net/andy_rowell/2013/05/the-largest-seminaries-fall-2012-enrollment-data-for-association-for-theological-schools.html. Data for 2015 from Chelsen Vicari, “What Are America’s Largest Seminaries?” *The Aquila Report*, August 4, 2016, accessed February 17, 2017, <http://theaquilareport.com/what-are-americas-largest-seminaries/>. Data for 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020, and 2021 compiled by author from ATS Institutional Data Tables (following the same schools as Rowell and Vicari), at ATS Institutional Data Tables, accessed September 12, 2017, <https://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/institutional-data/annual-data-tables/2015-2016-annual-data-tables.pdf>. Master’s Seminary is not accredited by ATS, and information was taken from the web. Chart institutional order by most recent (2021) ATS Data Tables. Where data was not available, NA is posted.

INSTITUTIONAL DATA CONCLUSIONS

People, though often quiet, still “vote with their feet” and express their opinions by leaving institutions they can no longer support and becoming involved or enrolled in organizations that hold their point of view. Table 1 could provide greater camaraderie between complementarian institutions. Denominational leaders may reconsider where realignment is needed between institutions and the churches which support them. Further, these seminaries represent future leadership and direction of churches and denominations.

The unexpected data results from this research reveal complementarian doctrinal statements have not created institutional decline, but rather may have enhanced enrollment.²⁴ Between 2009 and 2021, several institutions have contracted, as may be noted above. Among these institutions are Fuller, Gordon Conwell, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and Bethel Seminary. Christianity Today recently documented these declines, citing reasons such as “financial challenges” or the need to “sell the main campus and move.”²⁵ Considering the significant graduates of these institutions, these are unprecedented times.

Leon McBeth, a former professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary,

predicted in 1979 that “practical concerns will outweigh more theoretical arguments in shaping the ultimate decisions of Southern Baptist about the roles of women.”²⁶ While some seminaries may choose McBeth’s “practical outweighs theological” approach to the issue of women in ministry,²⁷ the current state of many seminaries indicates that women are aware of these doctrinal statements and are still significantly enrolling in complementarian institutions.²⁸ Albert Mohler affirms what is supported by this research:

All of the seminary campuses have been significantly affected by a change in the approach towards preparing women for ministry. . . . We have as many women studying and as much as a percentage of women studying on our campuses as ever before. But they’re coming knowing where we stand, appreciating where we stand, sharing our belief in the Scripture, understanding the importance of those beliefs and ready to go out and do what God has called them to do as directed by Scripture. And that is a beautiful thing.²⁹

These complementarian institutions are also welcoming and sustaining significant female enrollment. The follow up interviews at each of the twelve institutions revealed complementarian viewpoints among female institutional leaders vary in practice,³⁰ but

they also revealed women being honored and valued. Several complementarian higher educational institutions have developed programs or courses for women.

DENOMINATIONAL DETERMINATION AS EGALITARIAN OR COMPLEMENTARIAN

The empirical research on denominations supports the truth of Wayne Grudem’s statement that many denominations are “strongly truth based and doctrinally diligent”³¹ and represent “thousands of independent churches and Bible churches across the United States . . .”³² The Christians

for Biblical Equality (CBE) published an article, “U.S. Denominations and Their Stances on Women in Leadership,” that extracts direct quotes of egalitarian or complementarian statements from each denomination’s website.³³ Gordon Conwell Seminary has also provided a “Denominational Chart” that highlights denominations by theological distinctives, gender, baptism, and other distinctives.³⁴ Using the gender role affiliations determined by CBE and Gordon Conwell at the time of their research, the complementarian-egalitarian denominational alignments are compiled in Table 2.

Complementarian Denominations		Egalitarian Denominations	
Acts 29	Conservative Baptist Churches CBA	Advent Christian	Evangelical Covenant Church of Amer.
African Methodist Episcopal	Evangelical Com. Church –	African Methodist Episcopal Church*	Evangelical Lutheran Church in Amer.
All Nations Church Network	Lutheran	African Methodist Episcopal Zion Ch.	Evangelical Presbyterian Church
American Baptist Association	Evan. Free Church of America	Alliance of Baptists	Free Methodist Church (The); N. Amer.
Anglican Catholic Church	(EFCA)	American Baptist Churches USA	International Church of Foursquare
Anglican Church in North America	Evangelical Lutheran Synod	Assemblies of God	Gospel International Pentecostal
Anglican Province of Christ the King	Evangelical Mennonite Conference	Brethren in Christ	Holiness Ch.
Anglican Province of Christ the King	Evangelical Methodist*	Charismatic Episcopal	Korean Presbyterian Church Abroad
Apostolic Christian Church of America	Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches	Christ Church Fellowship	Lutheran Cong. Mission for Christ
Apostolic Lutheran Church of America	Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches	Christian Church/ Disciples of Christ	Mennonite Church USA
Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church	Great Commission Association	Christian Methodist Episcopal	Pentecostal Church of God
Bible Fellowship Church	Independent Bible Churches	Christian Reforme Church N. America	Presbyterian Church USA
Bible Presbyterian Church	Korean Evangelical Holiness	Church of the Brethren	Progressive National Baptist Convention
Christian Churches/Church of Christ	Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod	Church of God General Conf (CGGC)	Quakers (Religious Society of Friends)
Christian Episcopal Church	Lutheran Ministerium and Synod	Church of the Nazarene	Reformed Church in America
Christian Missionary Alliance	Mennonite Brethren Churches	Church of God in Prophecy	Salvation Army
Christian Methodist Episcopal	Orthodox Presbyterian Churches	Converge (Baptist General Conference)	United Church of Christ
Christian Churches/Churches of Christ	Primitive Baptists	Cumberland Presbyterian	United Methodist Church
Church of God Mountain Assembly	Presbyterian Church in America	Episcopal Church (ECUSA)	Vineyard Christian Fellowship
Church of God in Christ*	Presbyterian Reformed Church	Evangelical Catholic Church	Wesleyan Reformed Union
Church of the Lutheran Confession	Redeemer City to City	Evangelical Christian Church - Canada	
Concordia Lutheran Conference	Reformed Presbyterian Church, N. Am.		
Confederation of Reformed Evan.	Sovereign Grace Ministries		
	Southern Episcopal Church		
	United Episcopal Church		

²⁴ This has certainly been the case at Heritage Seminary where we serve in Cambridge, Ontario.

²⁵ Daniel Silliman, “Gordon Conwell to sell Main Campus, Move to Boston,” *Christianity Today*, May 17, 2020. Accessed August 10, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/may/gordon-conwell-sell-campus-financial-enrollment-struggle.html>. See also, Daniel Silliman, “Facing Financial Challenges, TEDS Cuts Faculty Positions,” *Christianity Today*, April 12, 2022. Accessed August 10, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/april/teds-financial-trouble-crisis-perrin-faculty-cuts.html>.

²⁶ Leon McBeth, *Women in Baptist Life* (Nashville: Broadman, 1979), 186, cited in Duesing and White, “Neanderthals Chasing Bigfoot?,” 7.

²⁷ Duesing and White, “Neanderthals Chasing Bigfoot?,” 16.

²⁸ Ibid., 12.

²⁹ R. Albert Mohler, Jr., cited by Joni B. Hannigan, “SBC Seminary President Optimistic for ‘Golden Age’ in Theological Education,” *Baptist Press*, January 7, 2003, accessed May 13, 2017, <http://bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=14985>. Mohler cited in Duesing and White, “Neanderthals Chasing Bigfoot?,” 12. As a recent doctoral graduate from Southern, I can attest to this “beautiful thing.”

³⁰ The mixed methodology revealed insights not obtainable by content analysis alone. Website searches and site visits were greatly beneficial to fully understanding the complementarian educational institutions delimited by Grudem. For full research report see, Linda Reed, “Theological and Practical Ministry Training for Women in Complementarian Higher Education,” Ed.D thesis, (Southern Seminary, 2017).

³¹ Wayne Grudem, *Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism*, 286. Grudem highlights these denominations as the Evangelical Free Church, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and Sovereign Grace Ministries (formerly PDI).

³² Ibid., 287.

³³ CBE Staff and Volunteers, “U.S. Denominations and Their Stances on Women in Leadership,” April 2007, 1-15, accessed February 13, 2017, <http://www2.cbeinternational.org/new/E-Journal/2007/07spring/denominations%20first%20installment--FINAL.pdf>. CBE lists a statement from each denominational website next to each denomination. As noted by CBE, undeclared includes Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference, Reformed Episcopal Church, Baptist General Conference, Baptist General Convention of Texas, Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference, Greater Grace World Outreach, Jesus Movement, New Frontiers, The Family International, Ministers Fellowship International, New Testament Christian Churches of America, Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Federation of Reformed Churches. Ibid., 7-9.

³⁴ Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary’s chart defines complementarian as “the view that women may not be ordained nor have leadership positions over men . . . [and egalitarian as] the view that women may be ordained and/or have leadership positions over men. . . . [However], “There are modifications and variations in each of these positions.” *Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary*, “Denominational Chart,” 2015, 1, accessed February 13, 2017, http://www.gordonconwell.edu/resources/documents/11R_DENOMINATIONALCHART.pdf.

Neither of these organizations included the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), Harvest Bible Fellowship, Great Commission Collective (GCC Canada), Fellowship of Evangelical Baptists (FEB), the Associated Gospel Churches of Canada, or the General Association of Regular Baptists (GARB), all of which are confessionally complementarian.³⁵ While denominational leaders may currently be wondering whether to yield to the changing tide, the evidence reveals a significant number of denominations hold to a complementarian point of view. Although one may assume (or be told) that complementarian denominations and individual churches are limited, the data reveals this is simply not the case.

CHURCH GROWTH STUDIES

Since believers have been told the complementarian position represents “the minority view” among Christian scholars,³⁶ one may then wonder: “Is this the minority view among churches?” Robert Yarborough of Covenant Seminary notes, “Of the 30% of the world church, which is largely Protestant, only a small minority ordain women and encourage wives and

husbands to abandon the biblical notion of male headship in marriage.”³⁷ Yarborough goes on to state, “Solid numbers are hard to come by, but it appears that well over 90% of the church worldwide affirms the historic position of man and woman in church and marriage that the complementarian position reflects.”³⁸

Five research studies indicate conservative biblical teaching, with male pastoral leadership, leads to church health. Barna Research notes that 58 percent of female pastors are found in “mainline” churches,³⁹ and that females pastor smaller churches.⁴⁰ The Hartford Institute notes the Unitarian Universalist (30 percent) and United Methodist (25 percent) denominations have the highest percentages of female pastors.⁴¹ John Lompens cites Len Wilson’s research of the United Methodist denominations that shows women are not leading large, thriving churches.⁴² Further study reveals — sometimes to the consternation of the researchers — that thriving churches are often led by male graduates trained at evangelical seminaries.⁴³

As David Haskell reports in *The Hamilton Spectator*, a Canadian newspaper, “After

statistically analyzing the survey responses of over 2,200 congregants and the clergy who serve them . . . [we found] a startling discovery: conservative Protestant theology is a significant predictor of church growth, while liberal theology leads to decline.”⁴⁴ Research by Haskell, Flatt, and Burgoyne compared declining churches and disagree with the notion that “theology and church growth are not linked,”⁴⁵ proving instead that they are inextricably linked. Further, Andrew Davis encourages churches to revitalize through establishing male pastoral leaders.⁴⁶ Mary Anderson, a senior pastor in a Lutheran church, notes:

Forty years ago women began to move slowly into the pulpits of Lutheran churches in America just as members were starting to move out of the pews. I don’t know that this phenomenon is strictly a coincidence. No doubt our feminist freedoms and our resistance to traditional institutions of all kinds has some unintentional collisions along the ways. Through these decades both trends have increased so that in 2010, more ordained women, along with many of their male colleagues, are serving congregations that are surviving rather than thriving.”⁴⁷

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The quantitative data indicates many

complementarian organizations are experiencing vitality, both statistically and financially. But truth be told, there is also a need to consider the qualitative data. During the summer of 2022, some complementarian institutions have faced upheaval and scandal as it pertains to the treatment of women. Where there is unjust treatment and unfair practices, women are speaking the truth.

In the face of such challenges, do we abandon God’s truth for men and women? Some young egalitarians find it unthinkable to include Ephesians 5 in their teaching. This research does not support “dealing treacherously” (Mal 3:10–17) with women, but rather that “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). The truths of scripture, including the care Jesus showed to women, must be modeled within our homes and institutions.

Many complementarian institutions have strong statements about female dignity on their websites, such as this one from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary: “the marriage relationship models the way God relates to His people.”⁴⁸ Thoughtful and integral interactions between men and women, as explained in Ephesians 5, bear witness to God’s truth. “A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church

³⁵ Neither group list in table 1 includes the Harvest or the Southern Baptist denomination. Pew Research Center identifies the Southern Baptist denomination as not ordaining women. David Masci, “The Divide Over Ordaining Women,” Pew Research Center, September 9, 2014, accessed July 17, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/09/the-divide-over-ordaining-women/>.

³⁶ Craig Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 101, states that complementarianism is regarded as the “minority view.”

³⁷ Robert Yarborough, “Hermeneutics: A Biblical Framework,” in “Understanding the Complementarian Position, 2012 Evangelical Free Churches of America Theology Conference notes,” 6, accessed July 17, 2017, https://go.efca.org/sites/default/files/resources/docs/2013/06/2012_fall_-complementarianism.pdf.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ George Barna Research Group, “Number of Female Senior Pastors in Protestant Churches Doubles in Past Decade,” accessed May 6, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/number-of-female-senior-pastors-in-protestant-churches-doubles-in-past-decade/>.

⁴⁰ George Barna Research Group, “Number of Female Senior Pastors.”

⁴¹ Hartford Institute for Religion and Research, “What Percentage of Pastors Are Female?” accessed April 30, 2017, http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/quick_question3.html.

⁴² John Lompens, “Evangelicals Continue Dominating Fastest Growing UMC Congregations,” March 20, 2016, accessed June 6, 2017, <https://juicyecumenism.com/2016/03/30/evangelicals-continue-dominating-fastest-growing-umc-congregations/>.

⁴³ Lompens notes that six of the denomination’s official United Methodist seminaries — Boston University School of Theology, Claremont School of Theology, Drew University Theological School, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Iliff School of Theology, and Methodist Theological School in Ohio — have not one graduate on this list of thriving churches. “Coincidentally, these also happen to be the most theologically liberal of our official UMC seminaries. Only ten of these 25 top church-growing United Methodist pastors are alumni of official UMC seminaries.” Ibid.

⁴⁴ David Millard Haskell, “Here’s Why Christianity Must Change or Die,” *The Hamilton Spectator*, December 4, 2016, 1. David Millard Haskell, Kevin Flatt, Stephanie Burgoyne, “Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy,” *Review of Religious Research*, 58: no. 4 (2016): 515-41.

⁴⁵ Haskell, “Here’s Why Christianity Must Change or Die,” 1.

⁴⁶ Andrew W. Davis, “Develop and Establish Men as Leaders,” in *Revitalize; Biblical Keys to Helping Your Church Come Live Again* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 175-85.

⁴⁷ Mary Anderson, *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 49 no. 4 (2010): 354, cited in Robert Yarborough, “Hermeneutics: A Biblical Framework,” in “Understanding the Complementarian Position, 2012 Evangelical Free Churches of America Theology Conference notes,” accessed July 17, 2017, https://go.efca.org/sites/default/files/resources/docs/2013/06/2012_fall_-complementarianism.pdf, 6.

⁴⁸ See Appendix of doctrinal statements of the twelve delimited complementarian institutions found in Linda Reed, “Theological and Practical Ministry Training for Women” in *Complementarian Higher Education: A Mixed Methods Study*, (Ed.D thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017), 256. Thesis accessed June 16, 2022 at <https://repository.sbt.edu/handle/10392/5470>.

. . . . She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband . . .”⁴⁹ Institutions that flourish both quantitatively and qualitatively consider both biblical order, and biblical value, as presented in Figure 1.

Quadrant 2 rightly emphasizes both a high regard for biblically ordered relationships, and valuing women as co-heirs of God’s grace. In this quadrant, believers hold all scripture in tandem as God’s authoritative word. With this perspective, marital relationships between husbands and wives,

moments, truth and grace, biblical order and biblical value together display the entirety of the word of God.

CONCLUSION

Truth is worth pursuing. It is possible, even as we stand in a new era which challenges biblical truth to “hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful” (Heb 10:23, NASB). The results of this study indicate many are choosing, even during our current societal, denominational, and institutional changes, to retain strong biblical principles.

We can hope these results would embolden church growth, strengthen denominational affiliations, and support complementarian Christian higher education that exalts, establishes, and beautifies scriptural truth even in our changing times. The truth told quantitatively will embolden church growth, strengthen denominational affiliations, and support complementarian Christian higher education. The truth told qualitatively will exalt Christ, establish His church, and beautify our marriages and ministries. This is a truth we can trust. ✕

“The truth told quantitatively will embolden church growth, strengthen denominational affiliations, and support complementarian Christian higher education.”

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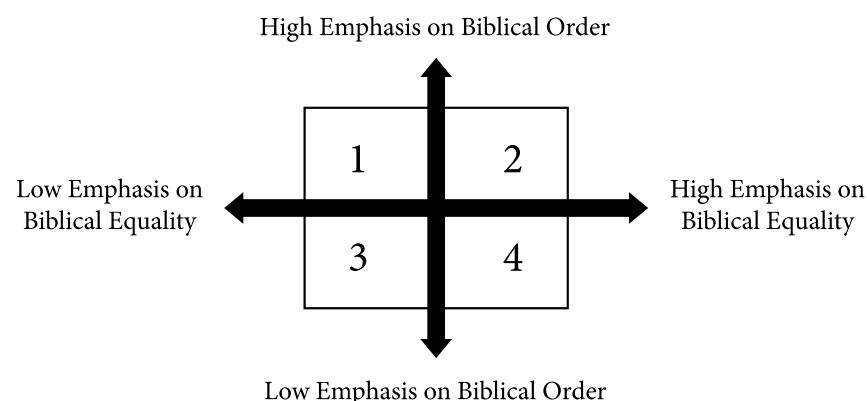


Figure 1. Scriptural views in tandem and tension

Many women have and are negatively reacting to what is conveyed by quadrant 1: a high emphasis on ordered relationships and a low emphasis on valuing women. Women long to be loved; this emphasis has negative implications within marriage or institutional contexts. In quadrant 4, there is a high emphasis on scriptures pertaining to equality and a low emphasis on scriptures that define biblically ordered relationships (cf. 2 Cor 11). In this scenario, scriptures such as Ephesians 5 are never or rarely taught.

Sadly, most women experience quadrant 3. They are not regarded as equals nor would they know any rightly ordered biblical authority that also loves, cares, and provides. This quadrant reminds us of the book of Judges.

church pastors and congregants, and institutional leaders and female faculty and staff, uphold both a high value regarding biblically ordered relationships (1 Cor 11) and a high personal value towards men and women (Gen 1–2, Gal 3:26–28, 1 Pet 3).

Some biblical scholars tend to focus on the North-South axis of biblical authority and order. Others, by contrast, focus on the East-West axis, likely preferring to turn the entire diagram so that true north represents equality while downplaying scriptural teaching on authority in the home or institution.

Women are knocking on the office doors of our institutions and asking complementarians difficult questions or expressing personal pain. In these

⁴⁹ Ibid. Note: This article is not intended to divide complementarians and egalitarians, but rather to provide insights that reveal truth (Mark 4:22). Jesus’ final prayer in John 17 was “keep them from the evil one...sanctify them in the truth, Your Word is truth. . . that they may be one, [and] so that the world may believe that you sent Me.”

Detransitioners in Your Church Doorway?

¹That is, undergone hormonal or surgical modification of their secondary sex characteristics.

²American Psychiatric Association and American Psychiatric Association, eds., *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*, 5th ed (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 454. For those not used to working with such small numbers, consider: of a million prepubescent children, split 50/50 between girls and boys, the DSM-5 numbers predict 70 boys and 15 girls will have diagnosable gender dysphoria.

³Kacie M. Kidd et al.,

"Prevalence of Gender-Diverse Youth in an Urban School District," *Pediatrics* 147, no. 6 (June 2021), doi:10.1542/peds.2020-049823.

WHAT WILL YOU DO WHEN A DETRANSITIONER COMES TO YOUR CHURCH?

With more young Americans identifying as transgender, easy access to cross-sex hormones, and insurance coverage for gender reassignment surgery, the number who have transitioned¹ has exploded. In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association estimated the prevalence of gender dysphoria as 0.014% in boys and 0.003% in girls.² A 2021 study found that 9.2% of public high school students in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania did not identify with their biological sex, a roughly thousandfold increase in less than a decade.³ As the UK high court's since-overturned 2020 decision regarding Keira Bell highlighted, few to no safeguards protect youth funneled



into gender transition.⁴ Prior to the explosion in gender reassignment interventions, the previous standard of care — “watchful waiting” through puberty — resolved gender dysphoria for approximately 85% of children who once yearned to become the other sex.⁵ Roughly 17 out of 20 children with gender dysphoria desisted when never encouraged to transition. With today's push for transition-affirming interventions, how many of those 17 will be rushed into gender transition and later regret that decision and *detransition*?

⁴“Other Countries Should Learn from a Transgender Verdict in England,” *The Economist*, December 12, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2020/12/12/other-countries-should-learn-from-a-transgender-verdict-in-england>.

⁵Paul W. Hruz, “Deficiencies in Scientific Evidence for Medical Management of Gender Dysphoria,” *The Linacre Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2020): 34–42.

Detransition has multiple meanings, but denotes a cessation and possible reversal of the social, hormonal, and surgical changes that supported the individual presenting as other than their biological sex.⁶ We have an ever-increasing number of transitioned youth who may seek detransition. Sex researcher Debra Soh sounds the alarm:

Within sexology, we saw this tragic period coming for years, the only logical outcome following a generation of children being rushed to transition without critical thought. We tried to stop the epidemic that is coming. No one would listen. [...] The more I learn about detransitioners, the more heartbroken I become. There is no question in my mind that the 2 percent statistic of those who regret transitioning is going to multiply vastly in the years to come. *When society looks back on this in horror — we tried to warn you.*⁷

The 2% estimate Soh references originates from studies conducted when transition was less socially acceptable, no medical insurance would pay for it, and the prevalence of gender dysphoria was lower. Transition regret was almost certainly always higher than reported.⁸ Contributing to that underreporting is that regret often lags transition by a decade or more,⁹ but recent studies indicate that gap may be narrowing.¹⁰

Society has cause to fear a tsunami of detransitioning. While transition-affirming interventions may initially feel like an accomplishment, especially for girls receiving testosterone (a known mood enhancer), the novelty eventually wears off. The

reaction of the gender activist community to detransitioners has been to suggest they were never transgender in the first place, rather than offering sympathy.¹¹ One recent study posits detransition as primarily a reaction to “pressure from family and social stigma,” while admitting detransition rates as high as 13%.¹² Multiple studies from the United Kingdom support detransition rates of 10–20%.¹³ More inclusive surveys have described detransitioning for varied medical, social, and psychological reasons.¹⁴

In the United States, we can expect thousands to tens of thousands of surgically or hormonally altered youth, disillusioned by a transition that brought them no healing, to be casting about for a new community. Any number of these young adults will seek out Christian churches holding a traditional binary view of sex and gender, but are these churches and their leadership ready to meet this need?

The works of Walker,¹⁵ Branch,¹⁶ Yarhouse and Sadusky,¹⁷ and others have provided insight into the challenges faced by people with gender dysphoria, but none to date has provided a biblical story in which those permanently changed by surgeries and hormones can see themselves as loved despite regretting that choice. While the parable of the prodigal son provides a general narrative of regret and return, the wayward son was whole in a way that detransitioners are not. In many ways, the biblical story of eunuchs provides specific hope for the sexually damaged.

Those railing against biblical views of marriage and sexuality were the first advocates for eunuchs as prototypes of

⁶ The term “desistance” is often used to refer to social detransitioning, generally in the absence of past surgical or hormonal interventions. For the purposes of this article’s call to pastoral care, these individuals are included, even without the specific physical modifications that prompt comparisons to eunuchs. Also note that the transgender population includes those who choose to present as nonbinary, so detransition may reflect a return to congruence with biological sex even if the individual in question never identified as the sex not conforming to their biologic sex.

⁷ Debra Soh, *The End of Gender: Debunking the Myths about Sex and Identity in Our Society*, (New York: Threshold Editions, 2020), 188. Emphasis added.

⁸ Studies which have suggested detransition is rare appear methodologically inadequate to draw such a conclusion. For example, Sasha Karan Narayan et al., “Guiding the Conversation—Types of Regret after Gender-Affirming Surgery and Their Associated Etiologies,” *Annals of Translational Medicine* 9, no. 7 (April 2021): 605, doi:10.21037/atm-20-6204, posits a 0.2–0.3% regret rate, yet surveyed surgeons rather than patients, only had a 30% response rate, and only considered a patient to regret gender reassignment surgery if that patient approached their original surgeon seeking reversal.

⁹ Robert Withers, “Transgender Medicalization and the Attempt to Evade Psychological Distress,” *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 65, no. 5 (November 2020): 865–89, doi:10.1111/1468-5922.12641.

¹⁰ Stephen B. Levine, E. Abbruzzese, and Julia W. Mason, “Reconsidering Informed Consent for Trans-Identified Children, Adolescents, and Young Adults,” *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, February 24, 2022, 1–22, doi:10.1080/0092623x.2022.2046221. It is reasonable to posit that recent easing of barriers to transition and newer studies finding a decrease in time to regret are connected: lower effort to transition required less commitment.

¹¹ Soh, 185; Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* (Washington: Regnery, 2020), 192.

¹² Jack L. Turban et al., “Factors Leading to ‘Detransition’ Among Transgender and Gender Diverse People in the United States: A Mixed-Methods Analysis,” *LGBT Health* 8, no. 4 (June 1, 2021): 273–80, doi:10.1089/lgbt.2020.0437. This study relies upon the online “US Transgender Survey” that only sought input from currently transgender-identified individuals. Its methodological limitations did not prevent it from being quoted in *The New York Times*, however: Azeen Ghorayshi, “Doctors Debate Whether Trans Teens Need Therapy Before Hormones,” *The New York Times*, January 13, 2022, sec. Health, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/health/transgender-teens-hormones.html>.

¹³ Levine, Abbruzzese, and Mason, 6–7.

¹⁴ Lisa Littman, “Individuals Treated for Gender Dysphoria with Medical and/or Surgical Transition Who Subsequently Detransitioned: A Survey of 100 Detransitioners,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 50, no. 8 (2021): 3353–69, doi:10.1007/s10508-021-02163-w.

¹⁵ Andrew T. Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say about Gender Identity* (Centralia, WA: The Good Book Company, 2017).

¹⁶ J. Alan Branch, *Affirming God’s Image: Addressing the Transgender Question with Science and Scripture*, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019).

¹⁷ Mark A. Yarhouse and Julia Sadusky, *Emerging Gender Identities: Understanding the Diverse Experiences of Today’s Youth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2020).

transgender persons.¹⁸ Activists who do not see humanity divinely appointed and formed in only two sexes do not have a monopoly on these interpretation of such Scriptures, however. Viewing the scriptural witness through a biblical theology lens reveals a trajectory towards hope for those whose sex organs are not whole.

PROHIBITION OF EUNUCHS

The story of eunuchs in the Bible has four movements: prohibition, promise, acknowledgement, and inclusion. In the Torah, eunuchs are prohibited from serving in the priesthood (Lev. 21:20) or worshiping in the assembly (Deut. 23:1). For quite some time after the law was given, we see few mentions of סָרִיס (eunuchs) in Israel, but they gradually enter the picture, especially in the divided kingdom during and after the reign of Jezebel.¹⁹ Within Samuel’s admonition to the people about the drawbacks of kings, 1 Samuel 8:15 notes that סָרִיס would be the eventual beneficiaries of tithes on grain and wine levied by the king.²⁰ We see Jezebel defenestrated by her own eunuchs at Jehu’s command in 2 Kings 9:32. At the time of Josiah’s reforms, 2 Kings 23:11 uses the dwelling of Nathan-Melech the סָרִיס as a landmark identifying where the horses “dedicated to the sun” were located prior to Josiah removing them, presumably as idolatrous. By the time Jeremiah is rescued after the intervention of Ebed-Melek (the first Ethiopian eunuch) in Jeremiah 38:7–13, eunuchs are openly present in Zedekiah’s court.

A PROMISE TO EUNUCHS

We see a *promise* to eunuchs in Isaiah 56:1–4. This is timely because the named male protagonists of the exile and return were possibly eunuchs, and they were understood as such by rabbinical sources.²¹

Upon arrival in Babylon, Daniel — along with Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah — is taught and acculturated into the ways of court by Ashpenaz the chief eunuch (Dan. 1:3–4). While the text never documents their castration, extra-biblical literature notes that such captives were often castrated for use as court servants.²² Bereft of their families, names (Dan. 1:7), and procreative abilities, captive eunuchs had no identity other than as servants of their new master.²³ Indeed, this lack of external loyalties probably explains why Daniel can serve both the Babylonians and their successors, the Medes and Persians. Without family or the possibility of one, Daniel was just useful property to the new regime. After killing Belshazzar and taking over Babylon, Darius the Mede promptly appointed Daniel to high office (Dan. 6:1–2) as the first recorded act of his reign. Daniel is apparently quite long lived, as eunuchs tended to be, serving four kings.²⁴ The accomplishments and conflicts of Daniel and his companions are all within the context of court intrigue: they have no duties in their captivity other than civic service. No wives or descendants are indicated for any of the four. On two occasions, Daniel is rewarded by the monarchs he serves (Dan. 2:48–49; 5:29), but neither involves any rewards of a marital or sexual nature, nor makes any promises to offspring or family. Josephus describes Daniel as a eunuch, but since he writes as an apologist, portraying a well-respected Jew as a eunuch to his Roman audience may be an attempt to draw points of similarity between the cultures rather than recitation of an established fact.²⁵ Jerome notes such traditions in his commentary on Daniel, but suggests that Daniel 1:4’s clause “without physical defect” precluded the castration

¹⁸ As Nancy Wilson opined in 1995: “eunuchs and barren women, I believe, are our gay, lesbian and bisexual antecedents” in *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 124.

¹⁹ While סָרִיס is traditionally understood to have a dual meaning encompassing both castrated men and palace officials, recent scholarship has called that into question, suggesting that all סָרִיס in the Old Testament are eunuchs. See Jonathan P. Clemens, “An Everlasting Name Which Will Not Be Cut Off: Eunuchs as Biblical Models of Hope For Detransitioners” (Th.M. Thesis, Western Seminary, 2021), <https://www.tren.com/e-docs/search.cfm?p002-0989> for a more thorough discussion.

²⁰ Janet S. Everhart, “The Hidden Eunuchs of the Hebrew Bible: Uncovering an Alternate Gender” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Denver, CO, The Iliff School of Theology and University of Denver, 2003), 97.

²¹ Everhart, 153 n123.

²² Vern L. Bullough, “Eunuchs in History and Society,” in *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond*, ed. Shaun Tougher (London; Oakville, CT: The Classical Press of Wales and Duckworth, 2002), 1–18.

²³ Gary Taylor, *Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 170–173.

²⁴ Piotr O. Scholz, *Eunuchs and Castrati: A Cultural History* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 2001), 115. No explanation is offered for the cause of such longevity, but the use of eunuchs in antiquity for white collar, rather than laborer roles, likely plays a larger role than any medical differentiation. However, Kathryn M. Ringrose (*The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 2003], 63) disagrees, noting that eunuchs tended to become osteoporotic and age prematurely due to testosterone deprivation. In the Byzantine context that Ringrose covers, eunuchs were generally castrated before puberty, not as men with fully developed skeletal calcium as Daniel and his companions likely were.

²⁵ “But now Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, took some of the most noble of the Jews that were children, and the kinsmen of Zedekiah their king [...] He also made some of them to be eunuchs [...] Now among these there were four of the family of Zedekiah, of most excellent dispositions, the one of whom was called Daniel.” Flavio Josefo, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 278. (Ant.10.186–9, accessed via Logos Student Gold).

of Daniel and the other Hebrews.²⁶ Origen and early rabbinic traditions both accept the castration of Daniel.²⁷

Mordecai, like Daniel and his companions, is another likely Hebrew eunuch.²⁸ He arrived with the second wave of captives (Est. 2:5–6), has no offspring mentioned, moves freely throughout the court including observing the harem (Est. 2:11), and receives his reward without reference to any descendants (Est. 8:1–2). Like Daniel, understanding Mordecai as a eunuch does not detract from his righteous acts or undermine his role as a faithful servant of God in a foreign court. If Mordecai was a eunuch, his success may have prompted jealousy from Haman, who with a wife (Est. 5:10,14; 6:13) and ten sons (Est. 9:10) has a family who can benefit from the king’s favor.

Nehemiah was a high official in the court of Artaxerxes I, and likely would have been castrated to serve in that position. Nehemiah has no wife or offspring noted in the text, even though his brother Hanani is mentioned twice (Neh. 1:2; 7:2).²⁹ Indeed, the Septuagint of Nehemiah 1:11 in both Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus has a textual variant reading εὐνοῦχος (eunuch) instead of οἰνοχόος (cupbearer). Nehemiah waits on King Artaxerxes while the queen is present as a eunuch would have (Neh. 2:6) and is given governorship over outlying territories of the empire (Neh. 5:14). Had Nehemiah any hint of dynastic potential, Artaxerxes would hesitate to give him a position of remote authority.³⁰ Like Daniel and Mordecai, Nehemiah’s status as a probable eunuch adds to the number of righteous potential eunuchs depicted in the Old Testament.

In addition to these named, faithful Hebrews, many others went into exile and were castrated to serve the Babylonian empire. Per the Torah’s prohibitions, no such eunuch could have been fully included in worship in the rebuilt temple.³¹ Unlike today’s detransitioners, no eunuch sought out his own castration, but that distinction is moot: Isaiah 56 promises all faithful eunuchs a place in the New Covenant.

Isaiah 56:1–8 is a prophetic word of hope to those excluded from the assembly under the Mosaic Law. In providing such hope, this passage departs from promises found elsewhere in Isaiah, which signal that benefits of worshiping God would be made available to outsiders; here, it explicitly includes the excluded.³² The passage calls out eunuchs and foreigners as being included in God’s blessings despite their nominal disqualifications. In doing so, the text highlights their faithful obedience, and specifically Sabbath observance. This passage is found in the third section of Isaiah, which focuses on the return from exile, necessarily including those made eunuchs during the exile.³³

The promise in Isaiah 56:5 is a triple entendre. The verb rendered “cut off” at the end of the verse (יכרת) is a very common verb with a variety of Old Testament uses. For example, it refers to the destruction of idolatrous monuments including Asherah poles (e.g., Ex. 34:13; Lev. 26:30; Judg. 6:25–6, 28, 30; 2 Kings 18:4), to the exile of transgressors from the nation of Israel due to sexual or other covenantal sins (e.g., Lev. 18:29; 20:17,18), as well as to castrated males prohibited from the assembly of the Lord (Deut. 23:1) and castrated animals forbidden as sacrifice (Lev. 22:24). Some translations render the permanence of these monuments without conveying this connection (e.g., “endure forever” [NIV], “not be eliminated” [NASB]) while others (RSV, NRSV, NKJV, ESV) maintain “cut off” with its range of meanings.

²⁶ St Jerome, *Jerome’s Commentary on Daniel*, trans. Gleason L. Archer (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 20–21: “From this passage the Hebrews think that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were eunuchs, thus fulfilling that prophecy which is spoken by Isaiah regarding Hezekiah: ‘And they shall take of thy seed and make eunuchs of them in the house of the king of Babylon’ (Isa. 37: 7). If however they were of the seed royal, there is no doubt but what they were of the line of David. But perhaps the following words are opposed to this interpretation: ‘... lads, or youths, who were free from all blemish, in order that he might teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.’” Jerome obviously either discounts or fails to consider that their unblemished status may have been a selection criterion for those to be made into eunuchs, as well as not a status that would have been necessarily documented by the text as modified by such mutilation.

²⁷ Everhart, 152–3. Note that Origen is hardly a disinterested party when discussing castration, if we can rely on Eusebius’ tale of Origen’s self-castration.

²⁸ Ibid., 155–6.

²⁹ Ibid., 153–55.

³⁰ Ibid., 154.

³¹ Clinton E. Hammock, “Isaiah 56:1-8 and the Redefining of the Restoration Judean Community,” *BTB* 30, no. 2 (May 1, 2000): 46–57, doi:10.1177/014610790003000202.

³² Andreas Schuele, “Between Text & Sermon: Isaiah 56:1–8,” *Int* 65, no. 3 (July 2011), 287: “The inner sanctum of the temple, God’s exquisite dwelling place on earth, is off limits to people without proper pedigree and, preferably, priestly lineage. Isaiah 56:1–8 departs from this tradition.”

³³ Hammock, 47.

THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF EUNUCHS

Jesus *acknowledges* eunuchs in Matthew 19:12, delivering a threefold taxonomy of the sexually imperfect: those born so (what we might term today as intersex), those made so by men, and those who made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. While the last category has been the subject of historical debate due to its ambiguity,³⁴ the middle category clearly included castrated slaves of Jesus' time. Today, that category includes people surgically or chemically changed so they no longer have intact physique, appearance, or reproductive abilities. Jesus mentions all three kinds of eunuchs without condemnation. Even though disorders of sexual development are noted in the rabbinic literature, this is their only biblical mention. Thus, in what looks like an offhanded response to the disciples's complaint, Jesus includes every person with imperfect sexual organs; he sees all of them. This mention does not seem to affect Jesus' ministry between its utterance and his ascension, but the impact is evident in Acts.

THE INCLUSION OF EUNUCHS

The *inclusion* of eunuchs in the kingdom begins in Acts 8 with the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch. Unlike Ebed-Melek from Jeremiah, who would be known to first century Jews, this Ethiopian eunuch is unnamed. Even though we regard Cornelius as the first Gentile convert, this eunuch was baptized first. Because the early church called no council to review Philip's actions, we miss the significance of this inclusion.³⁵ Philip does not need a vision from God telling him that this sexually imperfect foreigner should be included in the kingdom; the dual promise of Isaiah 56 is just a roll of the scroll away from where the foreign eunuch is reading in Isaiah 53 when Philip arrives at his chariot.

The ambiguous identification of the eunuch has prompted some commentators to question whether he was indeed castrated. He had come to Jerusalem "to worship" (Acts 8:27), which would have been problematic if he were castrated,

even were he a Jew (which is not stated in the text), based on the restrictions of Deuteronomy 23:1. He may have been the African equivalent of a God-fearer, a Gentile who found Judaism attractive yet insufficiently so to prompt circumcision.³⁶ Most strikingly, he has his own personal Isaiah scroll, not held as an heirloom, but read in a chariot! The Ethiopian eunuch is shown by the text to be literate, wealthy, and powerful. At the same time he is generally understood to be ethnically non-Jewish and almost certainly castrated by virtue of his trusted service to a female monarch.

Thus, the message of hope for eunuchs unfurls throughout the biblical narrative. Every imperfect person has a home within the kingdom, even the sexually imperfect. As an angel of the Lord leads Philip to the lost but receptive eunuch-foreigner, so we should also be ready to bring the good news to those kept from the assembly of the Old Covenant by their mutilated sexual organs but joyfully invited into the New.

But who can deliver this message of hope? Is there room in gender-as-spectrum ideology to embrace those who now believe their transition was misguided and possibly harmful? The silence on or perfunctory dismissal of detransition by Christian theologians advocating affirmation of transgender identities raises serious questions. Yarhouse and Sadusky suggest that this reluctance derives from the "lens" through which one views issues of gender identity:

If love for others means indiscriminately reinforcing every way a young person expresses themselves or their gender, it could become self-contradictory as the young person's experiences shift [...] As Christians who take seriously the fall, we know that people are not always reliable judges of their own well-being. The diversity lens's tendency toward unrestricted affirmation may limit those who adopt it from asking helpful questions or providing resources beyond transitioning.³⁷

Psychologist Robert Withers suggests that intolerance for detransitioners is rooted in the critics' own insecurities:

³⁴ The direction to emasculate (eunuchize) oneself does not occur in literary isolation within the Gospel of Matthew. This verse recalls Matthew 5:29–30, where Jesus urged his hearers to pluck out an eye or cut off a hand if necessary to prevent succumbing to temptation.

³⁵ Emma Percy, "Can a Eunuch Be Baptized?: Insights for Gender Inclusion from Acts 8," *Theology* 119, no. 5 (September 2016): 327–34, doi:10.1177/0040571X16647852.

³⁶ Scott Shauf, "Locating the Eunuch: Characterization and Narrative Context in Acts 8:26–40," *CBQ* 71, no. 4 (October 2009), 765.

³⁷ Yarhouse and Sadusky, 92.

It seems likely too, that those members of the trans community who are most active in silencing and denying the existence of detransitioners are attempting to police in others the doubts they cannot tolerate in themselves. If someone can bear to think about a thing, they can usually bear to let others talk about it. But if a person's sense of identity and social network are built around being trans, talking about doubts and regrets can be experienced as an existential and social threat.³⁸

Soh hypothesizes a political motivation behind such rejection, as detransitioners do not fit a neat narrative:

A question that is commonly asked is whether detransitioners were ever really transgender. Just because someone detransitioned doesn't mean they never experienced gender dysphoria or that their feelings weren't real. Similar to desisters, because detransitioners do not fit the story that trans activists would prefer to promote, they are dismissed by the community and told their dysphoria wasn't that severe.³⁹

Shrier congruently observes: "This is the circular logic that pervades trans ideology: if you desist, you were never trans to begin with. Thus, no real transgender people ever desist. It's an unfalsifiable proposition."⁴⁰

Detransitioners seeking spiritual care are not likely to find it in churches that embrace transition, both because their presence might complicate that church's outreach to transgender-identifying individuals and because the condolences offered by such a theological approach are, at best, weak. "Sorry it didn't work out for you," doesn't begin to reasonably engage with the depths of pain and disappointment, let alone the physical consequences, of a regretted transition.⁴¹

Thus, it will fall to churches holding to a binary view of gender to embrace and minister to detransitioners: if we do not do it, who will? And yet, the complexity of integrating persons with the physical hallmarks of a regretted transition into a congregation is not yet widely tested. Providing a biblical theology of redemption and hope as outlined here is a small step that can serve both detransitioners and the congregation that will need to welcome them in Christ's name.

The complexities of welcoming and integrating detransitioners should not be underestimated. They will arrive with not only the physical and emotional scars from their journey, but also the underlying hurt that originally prompted it along with a worldview that made it seem sensible. And yet, the call to do something hard should not prompt Christ's church to shirk this responsibility. Willingness to demonstrate love to people who appear unnatural will not come automatically, so church leaders must prepare their congregations' hearts and minds now to effectively love detransitioners who seek them out.

When a detransitioner appears at *your* church, will you be ready with a story of hope and inclusion? Will you have prepared your church greeters and briefed your elders or leadership team on a strategy to extend love, hope, and inclusion to a person who has been poorly served by an ideology and community which now rejects them? ✕

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³⁸ Withers, 873.

³⁹ Soh, 185.

⁴⁰ Shrier, 192. The entire chapter on regret, 185–204, is sobering reading.

⁴¹ As Shrier (201) reports: "Nearly all the detransitioners I spoke with are plagued with regret. If they were on testosterone for even a few months, they possess a startlingly masculine voice that will not lift. If they were on T for longer, they suffer the embarrassment of having unusual intimate geography — an enlarged clitoris that resembles a small penis. They hate their five-o'clock shadows and body hair. They live with slashes across their chests and masculine nipples (transverse oblong and smaller) or flaps of skin that do not quite resemble nipples. If they retained their ovaries, once off of testosterone, whatever breast tissue they have will swell with fluid when their periods return, often failing to drain properly."

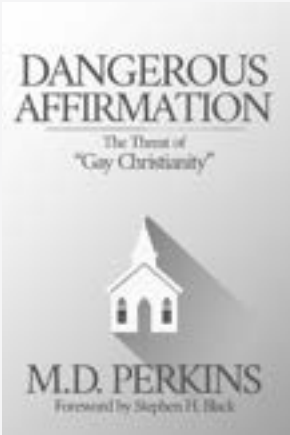
BOOK REVIEWS

REVIEWED BY ROSARIA BUTTERFIELD

Dangerous Affirmation: The Threat of “Gay Christianity”

While walking our dogs together last week, my neighbor Malcolm wanted to know why I do not support gay marriage. Did I not understand, he whispered, that it is part of the Fourteenth Amendment? The Fourteenth Amendment is one of the three amendments passed during Reconstruction to abolish slavery by granting citizenship and “equal protection under the laws.” I asked him how he knew that gay people were a protected category under the Fourteenth Amendment. I also asked him to stop whispering. He told me that people are born gay, that sexual orientation is genetic, and that denying gay marriage is the moral equivalent of supporting slavery.

Did I mention that Malcolm is a socially conservative history teacher at the local high school, a member of the local evangelical megachurch, and a life-long Republican?



M. D. Perkins. *Dangerous Affirmation: The Threat of "Gay Christianity."* Tupelo, MS: American Family Association, 2022.

How did we get to a place where gay marriage is considered a conservative constitutional value and a moral good?

We got here when segments of the evangelical church went along with the world's deception and started to believe and teach the idea that sexual orientation (a nineteenth-century category mistake) and gender identity (a twentieth-century category mistake) are basic categories of personhood. A new measure of the man was born with these category mistakes. Whereas the Bible records two kinds of people — men and women — “Gay Christianity” has added a third: gay people. And with “gay people” come all the other letters in the alphabet soup, LGBTQ. And do not forget the + sign. We have arrived at a place where common knowledge proclaims that sexual orientation is immutable and biological sex is a matter of psychological choice. Malcolm and whole segments of the broad evangelical church agree.

M. D. Perkins, author of *Dangerous Affirmation*, is a Research Fellow of Church and Culture for American Family Association, and a Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Perkins's denomination is hotly divided by the heresy of “Gay Christianity,” for now, in its Side B/Celibate variety. Perkins's book sounds the alarm from a faithful Christian husband and father who knows first-hand the dangers of allowing “Gay Christianity” to flourish without rebuke. *Dangerous Affirmation: The Threat of “Gay Christianity”* explains why “Gay Christianity” is not a mere fringe movement but rather a “dangerous leaven.” Perkins is best known for

his film productions *The God Who Speaks* (2018) and *In His Image: Delighting in God's Plan for Gender and Sexuality* (2020). But in addition to film production, in 2021, Perkins published a free eBook entitled *A Little Leaven: Confronting the Ideology of the Revoice Movement*.¹ M. D. Perkins, a gentle family man with an easy-to-follow speaking and writing style, is quickly emerging as the go-to first-responder of biblical faith against the heresy of “Gay Christianity.”²

Dangerous Affirmation is 222 pages of meticulously written analysis. Although the subject matter is weighty, Perkins's writing is clear, concise, and pastoral. Because there is not one ponderous sentence in the book, it reads quickly. I read it in one (long) sitting. Indeed, I could not put the book down. Its five chapters serve as an apologetics map for how the false teaching of “Gay Christianity” has entered the church. Perkins opens with a helpful introduction, “What is ‘Gay Christianity?’” Chapter 1, “Rethinking Theology,” addresses the problems of Queer Theology and Gay Celibate Theology. Chapter 2, “Rethinking the Bible,” identifies the problems in rejecting the biblical foundation and biblical language of homosexuality. Chapter 3, “Rethinking the Church,” shows how “Gay Christians” use homophobia and the language of LGBTQ+ as weapons to demand the church “repent” of the Bible's clear teaching. Chapter 4, “Rethinking Identity,” shows how the Freudian invention of sexual orientation is the wind under the sails of the “Gay Christian” identity. In this section, Perkins shows how deceptive these false teachers are, using a bait-and-switch with a biblical and secular

ideology, something the Revoice movement has perfected. Finally, chapter 5, “Creating Activists,” addresses how bans on conversion therapy and the rejection of all change-allowing therapies for homosexuality have married the church to the world. Perkins is right. In all the best ways, this book made me squirm. And course-correct.

Perkins reads his opposition with kindness and gives the benefit of the doubt where it is warranted. There are no straw-man arguments in the book and no vendettas. As Perkins takes you through the primary texts of “Gay Christianity,” you see the hermeneutical process by which biblical concepts (being born again; fighting sin) are replaced by therapeutic ones (stewarding homosexuality; queer treasures in heaven). The Bible's witness is that a repentant homosexual growing in sanctification is no longer a homosexual. But “Gay Christianity” teaches once gay, always gay. Instead of repenting and turning from sin, you merely “steward” and “navigate” it. “Gay Christianity” denies the power of the resurrected Christ, the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and the election of God the Father to create new creatures in Christ. Instead, “Gay Christianity” believes either that Bible-believing Christians should repent from thinking that homosexuality is a sin (Side A) or repent from believing that God changes people (Side B).

Perkins shows that the distinction between Side A (gay sex) and Side B (gay identity)

is a permeable, pencil-thin line, not an impassable mountain. He identifies how Side B “Gay Christianity” sits atop a hefty list of intellectual and theological errors: it collapses distinct biblical categories (nature, grace, sin); it invents words or neologisms and then imputes them with theological force (aesthetic orientation, mixed orientation marriage); it makes allegiances with idolatry and idolators (*Obergefell* decision, Spiritual Friendship); it twists ideas and misrepresents primary texts (Greg Johnson, *Still Time to Care*);³ and, celibate or not, it leads people to hell with a smile on their face and a Gay Pride sticker on their shirt. All this to say, “Gay Christianity” — the heresy that homosexual orientation is genetic, immutable, and morally good — is our generation's scourge of Neo-Orthodoxy. “Gay Christianity” is many things, but Christian isn't one of them. “Gay Christianity” is scurrilous slander against the cross of Christ.

My only criticism of this book is Perkins's handling of Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr.'s blog piece, “Sexual Orientation and the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (148).⁴ Dr. Mohler, like others in 2014, used the neologism “sexual orientation” to refer to an unchosen pattern of sexual desire that seemed to have no outside influence. Dr. Mohler distinguished this term from “the sexual identity structure that so often goes with sexual orientation” and flatly rejected homosexual orientation as a personhood category, thus situating his use of this

¹ <https://resources.afa.net/a-little-leaven-ebook-by-md-perkins>

² M. D. Perkins, “Responding to the Leaven of Revoice,” September 8, 2022, <https://afa.net/the-stand/culture/2022/09/responding-to-the-leaven-of-revoice/>.

³ M. D. Perkins, “What Greg Johnson Won't Tell you About ‘Double Repentance,’” *The Aquila Report*, February 23, 2022, <https://theaquilareport.com/what-greg-johnson-wont-tell-you-about-double-repentance/>. In this investigative essay, Perkins uncovers Greg Johnson's dishonest use of scholarship where he purposefully inserts an ellipses to occlude and misrepresent the obscure author Richard Lovelace, using Lovelace to support an idea that he rejected. As Perkins helpfully points out, most of us do not have this obscure book on our bookshelves, but Perkins does. And he helpfully brought this act of academic dishonesty to light.

⁴ R. Albert Mohler, “Sexual Orientation and the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” November 13, 2014, <https://albertmohler.com/2014/11/13/sexual-orientation-and-the-gospel-of-jesus-christ>.

neologism outside of a “Gay Christian” application. Dr. Mohler identified that some would trace homosexuality to a sin nature in Adam and not external trauma. In 2014, there was growing tension between the reparative therapy community — which maintained that homosexuality has root causes in trauma or neglect — and the biblical counseling community — which argued that homosexuality had root causes in Adam’s fall and the sin nature that we inherited. In this piece, Dr. Mohler was offering a Reformed understanding of original sin as it applied to homosexuality.⁵ Dr. Mohler consistently speaks against the heresy of “Gay Christianity.”⁶ Here is my plea to M. D. Perkins and the rest of us: let’s stop shooting our own on the battlefield. Al Mohler and M. D. Perkins are on the same side of this debate. And always have been.⁷

Dangerous Affirmation: The Threat of “Gay Christianity” is published by American Family Association (AFA) and at the writing of this review is available exclusively on the AFA website.⁸ For some, purchasing this book from AFA will pose an unwelcome change to the cushy, two-day, free Amazon Prime “shopping experience.” But as more books that proclaim actual biblical truth are canceled, we need to adjust to this new norm sooner rather than later.

Dangerous Affirmation is the definitive gold-standard book on “Gay Christianity.” Written with clarity, Christian integrity, Reformed theological foundations, and grace, it is a book every Christian can and should read. The sexual struggler will find hope. The moms and dads with children lost for now to LGBTQ+ indoctrination will find comfort and direction. The pastors who minister to people trapped in LGBTQ+ sins will find guidance. The elders who are considering hosting Revoice or launching special activities for “sexual minorities” will flee from idolatry. This book is a gem, reveling in the fact that repentance is a fruit of the Christian life. Because sin is not only a physical issue but a moral and ethical one, homosexual orientation is a sin, whether you act on it or not. Any movement such as “Gay Christianity” that erases sin on therapeutic terms or defends against repentance of unchosen sin because it is “spiritual abuse” is taking its playbook from Satan. And if the clarion call of *Dangerous Affirmation* sounds like culture war talk, you need to re-tune your ears. M. D. Perkins does not talk like a culture warrior. He talks like a Christian. ✕

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⁵It turns out that both the change-allowing counseling community and the biblical counseling community were both right, and no war between the two should have been waged. I have publicly confessed my own sin in waging this war here in “Retraction of my Position on Reparative Therapy and Ex-Gay Organizations,” <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a81dca7d55b41d51ee756c3/t/62cdd566fd-9ed703c736fdb7/1657656678694/Retraction+FINAL+EDIT+PDF.pdf>.
⁶Dr. Mohler wrote the introduction to and edited a collection entitled *God and the Gay Christian? A Response to Matthew Vines* (Louisville, KY: SBTS Press, 2014). He wrote the foreword to Denny Burk and Heath Lambert’s *Transforming Homosexuality: What the Bible Says about Sexual Orientation and Change* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), a book that challenged the idea that sexual orientation was fixed, inborn, or immutable.
⁷One issue might be that Nate Collins, founder of Revoice and author of a foundation book of Revoice ideology, *All But Invisible: Exploring Identity Questions at the Intersection of Faith, Gender, and Sexuality* (Zondervan, 2017), graduated from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where Dr. Mohler serves as president. But if this is an issue, Mohler and Perkins are tit for tat, as Greg Johnson, the Presbyterian Church in America’s most infamous gay pastor, is Nate Collins’s co-laborer in advancing Revoice ideology. As of this writing, and even with presbyterian polity, the PCA has been unable or unwilling to apply church discipline to its Side B Gay Christian infestation.
⁸<https://resources.afa.net/dangerous-affirmation-book>



The Biblical World of Gender:

The Daily Lives of Ancient Women and Men



Celina Durgin and Dru Johnson, eds. *The Biblical World of Gender: The Daily Lives of Ancient Women and Men*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022.

INTRODUCTION

The Biblical World of Gender, edited by Celina Durgin and Dru Johnson, is a collection of essays of various lengths that analyze the Bible’s portrait of men and women. The thirteen essays are organized into four sections: gender roles in the ancient world (Section 1), positive examples of biblical figures (Section 2), negative examples of biblical figures (Section 3), and misunderstood texts concerning gender (Section 4). Most of the essays are no more than ten pages in length, making *The Biblical World of Gender* accessible and brief.

SUMMARY

Section 1 includes four essays. Carol Meyers suggests that archaeological evidence shows that ancient Israelite

culture was not as patriarchal as sometimes is supposed, since women had much responsibility and influence within the household. Cynthia Shafer-Elliott stresses that the ancient Israelite household was a heterarchy — as opposed to a patriarchal or egalitarian model — in which power, authority, and responsibility were fluid and shared. Jeffrey Garcia contends that archaeological and inscriptional evidence points to the activity of women in synagogue services; they sat with the men, sometimes read the Torah, and perhaps even were the heads of the synagogue. Finally, Lynn Cohick contends that women in the Roman world had a certain amount of agency, for they could hold a high social status and were not restricted from making public appearances or from speaking in public.

Section 2 collects essays highlighting some of the commendable men and women in the Bible. Carmen Joy Imes writes on the women involved in the deliverance of Moses as an infant. James McGrath highlights the crucial role Jesus’s female disciples played in Jesus’s own ministry. Beth Stovell shows that some of the commendable men in the Bible, such as Joseph, Jonathan, Boaz, Jesus, the Beloved Disciple, and Paul, exemplify the virtues of forgiveness, friendship, and care for family and the helpless.

Section 3 highlights some less commendable examples of men and women in the Bible. Matthew Lynch argues that Genesis 1–11 portrays equality between males and females as the ideal, and male domination — exemplified in the case of Lamech, the Nephilim, and Nimrod — as the primary cause of violence against women. Nijay

Gupta analyzes whether early Christians treated their female slaves with dignity. Given the New Testament's strong sexual ethic, particularly that found in Paul's letters, the early Christians must have been taught "to give honor and dignity to all, including female slaves" (84). Dru Johnson's essay, while acknowledging the biblical motif of the wise woman, demonstrates that the Bible does not refrain from presenting us with examples of sinful women. These stories appear in Scripture not to denigrate women *per se*, but to show the pervasiveness of sin in both men and women.

Section 4 concludes the book with three chapters on "misunderstood" texts. Sandra



Richter analyzes Deuteronomy 22:13–29, showing that the law of Moses, in contradistinction with other law codes in the ancient Near East, did not command a woman to marry her rapist. She also suggests the punishments for sexual sin in the law of Moses are best explained in light of that sin's effect on the household and the Israelite community as a whole. Janelle Peters presents a brief study (four pages!) on the head coverings in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 11. Peters interprets head coverings as an indicator of individual autonomy, i.e., that one possesses authority over oneself. Thus, Paul's prohibition that men wear head coverings and his allowance of women to wear them was an attempt to uphold male/female equality. Erin Heim concludes the book with a chapter on Paul's greetings in Romans 16. Heim notes that Paul greeted women as well as men, holding them in high regard as his coworkers.

CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Edited books typically include some contributions that are stronger, more thorough, and better-argued than others. So it is with *The Biblical World of Gender*. The best essays interacted with the biblical text or provided primary-source evidence to elucidate the biblical text. Several essays stand out in this regard. Richter's essay on Deuteronomy 22 was especially salient for its interaction with Hebrew lexicology and comparative analysis of the law of Moses with other ancient Near Eastern law codes. Gupta's essay was likewise illuminative for its contrast between the Roman sexual ethic and that found in the New Testament. Cohick's essay reminds readers that one's assumptions about the experience of ancient women may or may not be accurate, and that it is too simplistic to rely on Aristotle's

portrait of Athenian daily life as a window into a woman's experience in first-century Rome. These essays were compelling for their focus on the biblical text and reliance on primary sources for the sake of comparative analysis with the biblical text.

Nevertheless, other essays failed to convince on the same grounds. For example, McGrath suggests from the Gospel narratives that Jesus learned from women. It was from women that he widened the scope of his mission (beyond the land of Israel), derived ministry practices like the washing of his disciples' feet, and discerned that not only men could learn and teach (50). The problem with this interpretation is that the Gospel narratives never say this — not even subtly. The Gospels never give the slightest indication that Jesus corrected his own previous misunderstanding due to the influence of women (or men, for that matter). A similar example of a failure to pay close attention to the text comes from Peters's interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11. Interpreting the "symbol of authority" in 11:10 as individual autonomy fails to convince, for it doesn't explain how that view logically flows as an inference from 11:8–9. These essays commend greater attention to what the biblical text actually says.

The aim of *The Biblical World of Gender* is not always clear to the reader. The subtitle of the book is "the daily lives of ancient women and men," which leads one to expect an analysis of ancient Israelite and early Christian lifestyles, as seen from the evidence of archaeology and the biblical text. While some of the essays focused attention on that topic (e.g., Meyers's essay), many did not, preferring instead an analysis of various biblical texts regarding

gender. While these essays may have been insightful, it was not always clear how they intended to cast much light on the "daily lives" of God's people. Another example in which the book lacked clarity concerns the Bible's portrait of gender roles. In the introduction the editors downplay the significance of "comprehensive gender roles" in the Bible, which instead evinces a more complex reality (xix). Certainly readers should beware simplistic and anachronistic assumptions regarding gender roles in the ancient Israelite and early Christian household. Nevertheless, I wonder if the book could have probed more deeply the Bible's prescriptions on gender roles, for it is not as though the Bible is silent on the matter. Careful exegesis of the biblical text illuminates our understanding of gender roles, not simply as those roles are described in the ancient world, but also as they were divinely given to function within the created order.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *The Biblical World of Gender* will prove a helpful resource for those interested in what the Bible teaches about gender. Its brevity makes it accessible to a wide readership, and on the whole the book presents a cohesive study. At the same time, the book's brevity and lack of clarity in aim and message may frustrate those wanting a more thorough and careful treatment of the biblical teaching on gender and gender roles. ✕

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In Quest of the Historical Adam: A Biblical and Scientific Exploration

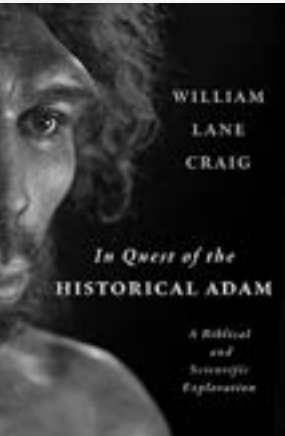


INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of the opening chapters of Genesis has been a subject of debate throughout the history of Christianity, but the urgency of the question increased with the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in the mid-nineteenth century. Since that time, some version of macroevolution has been the consensus understanding of the biological diversity of life on our planet in the scientific academy. The academic consensus has also gained considerable purchase at the popular level so that it is accurate to say that biological macroevolution is the common understanding of the development of organic life, including human life.

It is not difficult to see why the prevalence of this scientific consensus puts considerable pressure on one's Christian theological

commitments. The issues involved are legion. If the first chapters of the Bible are understood as a straightforward historical narrative, with the "days" of creation constituting a literal evening and morning (that is, a 24-hour day), then the earth is necessarily far too young for the evolution of life on our planet according to the common understanding. Even if one interprets Genesis 1 in a way that allows for a much older creation (such as the "day-age" theory or some versions of the literary framework hypothesis), the theory of the development of biological life by means of evolution still seems to undermine the biblical account of the creation of Adam and Eve as qualitatively distinct from other life forms, bearing the image of God. For this reason, many who hold to an old earth view of creation reject the claim that evolution can account for biological diversity, especially the development of human life.



William Lane Craig. *In Quest of the Historical Adam: A Biblical and Scientific Exploration*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021.

Furthermore, leading trends in paleoanthropology (the study of human fossils) and population genetics tell us modern man (*Homo sapiens*) emerged from multiple ancestral groups and regions, not from a single pair. This has become part of the evolutionary consensus. If true, what are Christians to make of the doctrine of original sin? If we are not all descended from Adam, how can we all be condemned in Adam (Rom. 5:18–19)? More importantly still, if the unity of the human species in Adam is not a matter of historical fact, then what of our redemption in Christ, which is typologically patterned after our condemnation in Adam (see Rom. 5:12–20 and 1 Cor. 15:20–59)?

In Quest of the Historical Adam

The tension between evolutionary science and Christian doctrine is palpable and has generated massive debate, not only between Christians and a secular age, but among Christians themselves. At the center of it all is the question of the historicity of Adam and Eve. One very important book published recently on this topic is William Lane Craig's *In Quest of the Historical Adam: A Biblical and Scientific Exploration*. This treatise is the fruit of many years of research and contemplation of the major biblical, theological, scientific, and philosophical issues at play. The result is a learned and fascinating tome sure to invite both admiration and ire from a wide range of invested readers.

This article will present a short overview of the conclusions of Craig's *Quest*, followed by a biblical and theological critique of his views. It will be seen that the proposal has much to commend it but suffers from some significant weaknesses, leading to

the conclusion that better options are available for how Christians should think and speak about Adam.

BOOK SUMMARY

As a theistic evolutionist, Craig accepts without critique the evolutionary consensus, believing that God used the process of evolution to bring about biological diversity. However, unlike many theistic evolutionists, he affirms the actual historical existence of an original human pair, whom the Bible refers to by the archetypal names of Adam (the Hebrew word for "man") and Eve ("mother of all living," see Gen. 3:20). Furthermore, he sees the historical Adam and Eve as the biological progenitors of the entire human race.

Commitment to the Historical Adam

In his opening chapter, Craig explores what is at stake in the question of Adam's historicity. He acknowledges that many Christians have argued for the importance of this question from the doctrine of original sin in Adam, which they then link to the atonement by an appeal to Romans 5:12–20. Following this line of thinking, many Christians have concluded that the historicity of Adam is "a 'gospel issue' — that is to say an issue on which the Christian faith stands or falls" (5). Craig, however, finds this argument unconvincing, largely due to his rejection of the doctrine of original sin and his claim that the doctrine is not taught in Romans 5.

Instead of arguing from original sin and its ties to the atonement, Craig stakes the importance of the historical Adam on the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture and the doctrine of the person of Christ.

Numerous Pauline texts indicate that Paul believed Adam to be a historical person and wrote about him as such. Since all Scripture, including Paul's epistles, is the very Word of God, Paul's indication of Adam's historicity must be taken as true. Otherwise, the standard doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture would need serious revision, something Craig is not willing to do.

Additionally, Craig observes that Jesus himself seems to have believed in the existence of an historical Adam (see Matt. 19:1–10). Craig argues that Jesus could not have held a false belief about Adam if he is true God, the second person of the Trinity. Though Jesus could have limited knowledge in his human consciousness, he could not believe falsehoods as an omniscient, divine person. Craig concludes, "Thus, as crazy as it sounds, denial of the historical Adam threatens to undo the deity of Christ and thus to destroy the orthodox Christian faith" (8).

What option is open for Craig if he is to maintain his commitment to both the orthodox Christian faith and the evolutionary consensus? He will offer an answer on both the biblical and scientific side of this question.

Genesis 1–11 as Mytho-History

Craig believes that the best moniker for the genre of Genesis 1–11 is *mytho-history*. That is, the opening eleven chapters of the Bible are not written as literal historical narrative. Rather, bearing the character of ancient near-eastern (ANE) myths, they are "traditional, sacred narratives set in a primeval age, featuring a deity as a central character, that seek to anchor realities present

to the Pentateuchal author in a primordial time" (131). However, unlike other ANE myths, the early chapters of Genesis have an "apparent interest in history" (132). This interest in history is evinced by the fact that the narratives progress by way of genealogies (the Hebrew word, *tôlādôt*, often translated, "These are the generations of" is a key feature of the text of Genesis). According to Craig, "By ordering the principal characters in lines of descent, the *tôlādôt* formulae turn the primeval narratives into primeval history" (133). Nevertheless, he goes on to warn, "It is important not to confuse an interest in history with historicity" (137). The accounts are marked by "fantastic" elements and inconsistencies that betray their mythological quality, but the characters themselves are real historical figures, of whom Adam is the first. Craig believes that the New Testament authors and Jesus speak about Adam in a way that demands his historical existence as a real person and the historical reality of his fall into sin. Craig helpfully summarizes his view regarding Genesis 1–11 as *mytho-history* in general, and the historicity of Adam in particular in the final chapter of the book:

While these narratives need not be read as literal history, the ordering presence of genealogies terminating in persons who were indisputably taken to be historical and the teaching of Paul in the NT about Adam's impact on the world, which bursts the bounds of a purely literary figure, oblige the biblically faithful Christian to affirm the historicity of Adam and Eve (363).

Adam and Eve as Homo-heidelbergensis

By interpreting the text of Genesis 1–11 in this way, Craig leaves open the

“Craig resolves this tension by making the case that we should push the boundary for the origin of humanity back before the origin of Homo sapiens”

possibility of affirming the truthfulness and reliability of *both* the biblical text *and* the modern scientific consensus regarding evolution. Respecting the latter, however, there is another issue Craig must address. Based on the work of evolutionary paleoanthropologists and population geneticists, the current scientific consensus is not only that mankind evolved from lower life forms, but also that the human race as we know it today did not emerge from a single original pair. In Craig’s view, however, if all humans are not descended from a single pair, then the biblical teaching on the historical Adam is undermined.

Craig resolves this tension by making the case that we should “push the boundary for the origin of humanity back before the origin of *Homo sapiens*” (279). Based on a fascinating survey of evidence from the fields of paleoanthropology, paleoneurology (the study of the brain cavity of fossilized skulls), and archaeology (the study of ancient cultural artifacts), Craig concludes that anatomical correspondence with modern man, comparable brain size, and culture-making practices all lead to the conclusion that the hominin species *Homo heidelbergensis* possessed the requisite features to be truly human.

Craig proposes that God chose one male and one female from among the *Homo heidelbergensis* species to be endowed,

miraculously, with a rational soul and thus made into the image of God. He brought the two together to become the biological progenitors of a new kind of creature — humans. *Homo heidelbergensis* (Heidelberg man) is widely believed to be a common ancestor to *Homo neanderthalensis* (Neanderthal man) and *Homo Sapiens* (Wise man, a.k.a., Modern man). Thus, while modern man may have emerged from multiple ancestral tribal groups and regions, true humanity should be seen to incorporate hominin species that predate modern man. Modern man, Neanderthals, and those of the Heidelberg class that descended from Adam and Eve should all be considered truly human.

According to Craig’s thesis, the possession of a rational soul, including the culture-making abilities that come with it, would have caused Adam and Eve and their descendants to isolate gradually from other *heidelbergensis* hominins who did not possess these qualities, resulting in a line of descent from Adam and Eve that is distinct from the progeny of non-human hominin groups.

By locating true humanity in the time period of *Homo heidelbergensis*, the timeline for the origin of humanity is pushed back much further than the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, making it entirely plausible that all humans

descended from a single original pair. Craig summarizes, “Adam, then, may be plausibly identified as a member of *Homo heidelbergensis*, living perhaps >750 kya [thousand years ago]. He could even have lived in the Near East in the biblical site of the Garden of Eden” (336).

CRITIQUING CRAIG’S VIEW

Commendable Features

Anyone familiar with Craig’s larger body of work will know him to be a very careful thinker who grounds his conclusions in research that impresses for both its breadth and its depth. Furthermore, he is a tenacious defender of the Christian faith. Those qualities of his work are certainly present in this treatise. To read this book is to read a scholarly *tour de force* and to receive a thorough education on the current state of the debate about Adam from the perspective of multiple academic disciplines.

Furthermore, from a Christian theological perspective, Craig is to be applauded for defending the historicity of Adam and Eve as real persons who sinned concretely and historically, precipitating the problem of sin in the world and the need for redemption in Christ. His commitment to Christian orthodoxy means he is unwilling to concede the point, in spite of any tension it creates with the scientific consensus. For this I am grateful. That said, Craig’s proposal is not without problems.

Biblical and Theological Problems

The Importance of Original Sin. As noted above, Craig is dismissive of the line of reasoning that moves from original sin to the atonement by way of Romans 5:12–20.

He is dismissive of the importance of the doctrine of original sin since, he claims, it is only purportedly taught in one passage (Romans 5), and he believes it is not actually taught even there (for his exegesis of Romans 5:12–20, see 226–241 of the book). He avers that Christianity can “get along” without the doctrine of original sin, which is a mere “theological add-on to which the Christian theologian need not be committed” (6).

A few comments are in order. First, I imagine most readers of Craig’s exegesis of Romans 5 will be unconvinced. In any case, there is a long history of exegesis of this passage that has been convincing to the vast majority of Christians through history, and this exegesis leads to the doctrine of original sin. I personally find the traditional Reformed exegesis of this text to be far more compelling than Craig’s considering the language and context of the passage and its place in the larger storyline of Scripture. The fruit of this more traditional exegesis can be seen in the Reformed confessional heritage, including many Baptist confessions, which affirm a strong doctrine of original sin, citing Romans 5:12–20 as a proof text.

Secondly, Craig seems to misrepresent the importance of the doctrine of original sin in the history of Christian doctrine. Outside of the Trinitarian and Christological debates of the first four and half centuries, no doctrinal controversy had a more far-reaching impact on the development of subsequent Christian doctrine than the Pelagian controversy. Pelagius famously denied any real effect of Adam’s sin on his posterity and posited that man could receive eternal life by living sinlessly. Augustine was the mighty

champion of the faith who most directly and successfully answered the Pelagian doctrine, largely by means of a robust and clear articulation of the doctrine of original sin, which Augustine himself believed to be the teaching of the church prior to this controversy. As is so often the case, the cauldron of controversy proved the occasion for the purification of the church's articulation of her convictions. Pelagius was condemned at a number of regional councils and ultimately at the ecumenical Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431).

These councils did not produce a confessional statement on original sin, but their condemnation of Pelagius was largely the fruit of a clarified doctrine of original sin. The history of Christianity following this controversy reveals that the doctrine of original sin has been an immovable mainstay of Christian orthodoxy. Craig claims that orthodox Christianity can "get along" just fine without original sin (6), but this is a strange thing to believe when, in fact, the entire history of Christian orthodoxy, in all its major traditions, has gotten along only *with* some doctrine of original sin and never without it.

Thus, while Craig is to be applauded for recognizing the importance of an historical Adam, it is unfortunate that he dismisses the most common Christian argument for the importance of Adam's historicity as a "gospel issue." The case for the importance of Adam is much stronger if this traditional argument from original sin is retained.

Genesis 1–11 as "Mytho-History"?

Another potentially problematic aspect of Craig's account is his proposal concerning

Genesis 1–11 as *mytho-history*. To be sure, Craig is not the first conservative Christian scholar to argue for this kind of non-literal reading of Genesis 1–11. Nevertheless, some words of critique are in order. Craig acknowledges that Genesis 1–11 has an "interest in history" and that the key figures are historical persons based on the *tôlādôt* formulae in the account.

For Craig, Genesis becomes straightforward literal history beginning with Abraham in Genesis 12, but the *tôlādôt* formula continues to be an important literary feature in the text of Genesis after chapter 12. This puts Craig in the inconsistent position of having to affirm two very different meanings for the *tôlādôt* of Genesis 1–11 and the *tôlādôt* of Genesis 12–50. The former are non-literal and even bear "family resemblances" to mythology while the latter are literally historical.

Now, if there were some obvious feature in the text that indicated the different use of *tôlādôt* and the different way of accounting for history once the line is crossed from Genesis 11 to Genesis 12, then this would be fine. But there seems to be no such feature. In fact, later biblical authors give us reason to suppose that Craig's dividing line between *mytho-history* (Genesis 1–11) and *history* (Genesis 12ff.) is an imposition on the text rather than a faithful reading of it. Craig himself acknowledges that Adam does not appear in Scripture again after Genesis 5 until 1 Chronicles 1:1. There, his name appears in a genealogy, and the genealogy crosses Craig's supposed boundary from *mytho-history* to *history* without any indicator of doing so. It seems the Chronicler understood the genealogies of Genesis 1–11 to have the same historical character as the later genealogies. This

understanding is further corroborated by the genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3:23–38. Jesus' lineage is traced all the way back to Adam, again with no indicator of a different kind of genealogical record beginning with *primaeval* characters. The understanding of later biblical authors should make us skeptical of any major division of genre between the genealogical and historical records of Genesis 1–11 and those of Genesis 12 and following.

As for a textual indicator for the division of Genesis, Craig appeals to "fantastic" elements in the text of Genesis 1–11. "Fantastic" elements are features of the narrative that are non-miraculous and, "if taken literally, are so extraordinary as to be palpably false" (104–105). Such features, according to Craig, include a talking snake and cherubim with a sword in Genesis 3, as well as the notion of an actual global flood event in Genesis 7–8, among other things. But if these so-called "fantastic" elements indicate that the text is not historical narrative, what is Craig to do with the presence of other seemingly "fantastic" elements in biblical texts that he takes to be fully historical? If a talking snake

disqualifies the account as historical in Genesis 3, does a talking donkey disqualify the account as historical in Numbers 22? Why is the account of a global flood in Genesis 7–9 any more "fantastic" than the parting of the Red Sea in Exodus 14? Keeping to examples in the text of Genesis, we may ask, why is the presence of cherubim guarding the way to the Tree of Life in Genesis 3 any more "fantastic" than angelic visitors to Abraham and then to Sodom in Genesis 18? The list could go on.

Craig would likely say that the later features in historical narrative are examples of miracles and thus do not qualify as "fantastic" (for his discussion of this distinction, see 104–105). But what prevents the category of miracle being applied to the supposedly "fantastic" elements in Genesis 1–11? What about the text, for example, demands us to believe that the statement of a talking snake was just a normal and natural feature, as though the Garden of Eden were a Narnian meadow? Is it not equally reasonable, since no other animals are said to speak in the narrative, to assume that the speaking of the snake was a matter of supernatural interposition,



much like the talking of Balaam's donkey? Craig's appeal to fantastic elements fails to establish a textual basis for rejecting the straightforward historicity of the first eleven chapters of the Bible.

Uncritical Embrace of Evolution

One final point of critique concerns Craig's uncritical assumption of the truthfulness of the modern scientific consensus regarding biological evolution. For many evangelicals, the evolutionary consensus is irreconcilable with the Christian faith. Given this, it is disappointing that Craig does not acknowledge the serious issue that many Christians take with evolutionary science, except to dismiss one version of evangelical creationism that takes exception with the evolutionary consensus — young-earth creation — as “wildly implausible” (13).

Serious, cross-disciplinary, scholarly work has been done by Christians with many different interpretive approaches to the creation account, demonstrating that the evolutionary consensus is not nearly as certain as the academic gatekeepers of the scientific community make it appear. The careful work of young-earth creationists, day-age creationists, and intelligent design theorists from the fields of biblical studies, theology, philosophy, and science has raised serious questions regarding the legitimacy of the evolutionary consensus. Such thinkers have proposed intellectually credible alternatives as well as critiques. The literature on this is voluminous, but perhaps the best single-volume comprehensive resource is the 2017 book, *Theistic Evolution: A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Critique*, edited by J. P. Moreland, Stephen C. Meyer, Christopher

Shaw, Ann K. Gauger, and Wayne Grudem. Shockingly, this work appears nowhere in Craig's bibliography, nor does he acknowledge any of the serious objections to the evolutionary consensus that is such a prominent feature of evangelical Christianity. This omission may give the impression that reconciling an historical Adam with evolutionary science is the only way forward for intellectually serious Christians, and that impression is false.

Better Options for Christians

The question of origins is a contentious one between Christians and a secular world and among Christians themselves. Of all the issues involved, none is more important than the question of Adam's historicity and the historicity of his fall into sin, precipitating the universal human problem of sin from which we need redemption through Jesus. *In Quest of the Historical Adam* is a fascinating treatment of the issue from the perspective of an orthodox Christian who affirms the modern scientific consensus regarding macroevolution. Some of the inherent tensions between orthodox Christianity and evolutionary science are resolved by this proposal, but numerous others remain. As such, I propose that there are better options available for intellectually serious Christians, options which do not include a wholesale embrace of the modern evolutionary consensus. ✕

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REVIEWED BY MICHAEL CARLINO

The Lies We are Told, the Truth We Must Hold: Worldviews and Their Consequences

Mature Christians are developed through a steady diet of the meaty truths of Scripture, and it is these who have their sensibilities calibrated to function in accord with God's revelation (Heb. 5:14). Sharon James is such a Christian. She is well-equipped for engaging the material and ideologies she addresses in *The Lies We are Told, the Truth We Must Hold*, as she has a longstanding track record of addressing complicated cultural debates in a way that is both biblical and comprehensible to the average Christian.

SUMMARY

James is clear about her intentions: “This book is intended as a simple primer, a ‘road map’ of some of the complex worldview issues that challenge Bible-believing Christians today” (10). Her thesis is that the options of “silence, acquiescence, and/or celebration buys into lies and ignores the truth... *The only solid basis for defending human dignity*



James, Sharon. *The Lies We are Told, the Truth We Must Hold: Worldviews and Their Consequences*. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2022.

and achieving justice is a biblical worldview” (22–23). To defend her thesis James divides the book into two parts. In part one (chapters 1–6), she takes on the godless ideologies plaguing society under the heading *the lies we are told*. In part two (chapters 7–10), she lays a biblical worldview under the banner of the *truth we must hold* in place of the lies she seeks to expose in part one.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

While this book is short in length, it punches above its weight as James wastes no time in part one of this book nuancing the sinful ideologies of Darwinism (chapter 1), Marxism (chapter 2), Feminism/Fatherlessness (chapter 3), Relativism (chapter 4), Critical Theory (chapter 5), or Theological Liberalism (chapter 6), and more. She goes right to the rotten core of “the lies we are told,” exposing the delusional autonomy that rejects God at the root, and then gives example after example of the horrifying ways in which the bitter fruit of these ideas has and still does wreak havoc on humanity. It was moving and revolting to read again of the history of how Marxism has been applied in Russia, China, and Cambodia, and to be reminded that this ideology opposes the dignified and fruitful multiplicity for which God has created humanity. Humanism opposed to God as Creator views humanity instead as material, and recurrently ends in gulags and inhumane treatment of image bearers during the Cultural Revolution (61–73). We must never forget these ghastly pages of history as though these “analytical tools” offered by Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, CT, and the others she mentions can produce anything but death and destruction.

James also insightfully connects how relativism gives way to fatherlessness, which removes God’s primary form of

protection for women and children. She explains, “In 1964 only four small countries (Austria, Latvia, Iceland, and Sweden) had more than 10 percent of children born outside of marriage. By 2016, more than 60 percent of children were born outside of marriage in twenty-five countries” (98). Readers are forced to look upon the dystopian wreckage the false prophets of relativism delivered while promising utopia. In a sad irony, while the sexual revolution offers freedom for those it purports were oppressed and victimized by men, it nevertheless exposes women and children to even greater danger by maligning and removing husbands and fathers. This reality offers a strong rebuttal to the incoherent charge of “family idolatry” alleged by some even within evangelicalism. The crying need of the hour is not the coddling of selfhood and individual expression, but a call for individuals to situate themselves within God’s created order appropriately. The much-maligned nuclear family is a fortress of protection from the world and Christians need not denigrate God’s good institution of the family unit for the flourishing of human civilization on the altar of cultural respectability. Rather than cater to the world’s fruitlessness and share in its sins, Christians are to plant our roots deep in the soil of God’s created order and in so doing we will bear much fruit even as the stumps of the world decay.

James further provides an insightful synopsis of how liberalism has evolved from the naturalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into the deconstruction liberal “Christianity” weaponizes now. In other words, just as they once used the worldly standard of naturalism to reject a biblical understanding of creation and human dignity, so too they now use the analytical tool of Derridean deconstruction to both muddle and then reject the plain meaning of Scripture. The deconstruction movement that plagues evangelicalism today is a direct result of reading God’s Word through the foreign and hostile lens of postmodern relativism. Those who profess Christ and yet move away from his word as the foundation for life and doctrine end up parroting the world. The result of this is that they end up pursuing whatever forms of “justice” the world is clamoring after because they are untethered from God’s word as authoritative and now

"Marxism... opposes the dignified and fruitful multiplicity for which God has created humanity."

engage Scripture from a position of authority rather than a posture of submission.

Again and again in this book James hits the target with precision and skill. It is deeply refreshing to read about the complex matters of worldview from an author who avoids the pitfalls of either nuancing the discussion to the point of obfuscation or sounding shrill in oversimplification.

CONCLUSION

The Lies We are Told, the Truth We Must Hold is a superb resource for Christians seeking to make sense of the complex and confusing cultural narratives surrounding us today. I would highly commend this book for parents to read with their children, as James does an outstanding job of summarizing her broader arguments in each chapter in bite-sized pieces and then providing further resources that parents can turn to when children ask questions based on the chapters. James has compiled an excellent list of resources — many of which are web links so that readers do not need to purchase more books for further study! Moreover, this book will serve a Sunday School class and/or small group well for the same reasons. James has done her fellow Christians a great service by writing this book. She has succinctly exposed the lies and bitter fruit of the ideologies that surround us, while also highlighting the true, good, and beautiful that can be attained in keeping with a biblical worldview. ✕

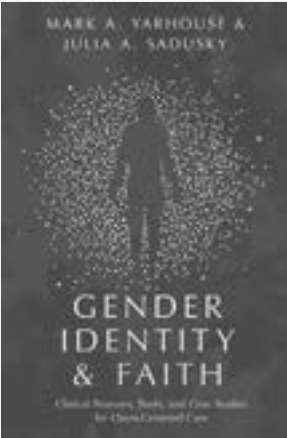
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REVIEWED BY JOSH BLOUNT

Gender Identity and
Faith: Clinical Postures,
Tools, and Case Studies
for Client-Centered Care

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of gender identity struggles, pastoral care, and counseling methodology is a Gordian knot of complex and competing instincts and convictions. The pastor or counselor wants to show compassion to the person sitting across from them in their office, or to the parents seeking help for their withdrawn teen. Good counseling involves good listening — and yet, with the popularization and cultural acceptance of gender ideologies, the struggles, definitions, and self-diagnoses that the pastor hears in response will increasingly represent a confusing mix



Mark A. Yarhouse and Julia A. Sadusky. *Gender Identity and Faith: Clinical Postures, Tools, and Case Studies for Client-Centered Care*. Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022.

- of assumptions and presuppositions:
- "Am I transgender?"
 - "My son says he is non-binary — what does that mean?"
 - Or the pastor may not hear questions, but rather declarations: "These are my pronouns. If you misgender me, you are denying my existence."

How do pastors and counselors respond in that moment? Is this an apologetics encounter, an opportunity to teach on biblical sexual ethics, a moment to "ignore the culture wars" and display unconditional love? Or are all three of those alternatives (as I have framed them) inadequate? How does the pastor or counselor cut the Gordian — might we say, the Freudian — knot of gender identity in post-LGBT revolution, post-Christian culture?

Mark Yarhouse and Julie Sadusky address just this question with their second co-authored work, *Gender Identity and Faith*.

As their biographies indicate, each brings a wealth of psychological research and clinical experience to the question. And yet, from my perspective, their conclusions in this book are neither helpful nor wise, and represent a potentially harmful influence on theological faithfulness and wise pastoral care.

SUMMARY

This topic is not new for either Yarhouse or Sadusky: on this specific topic, Yarhouse has published *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture*, and Yarhouse and Sadusky have co-authored *Emerging Gender Identities: Understanding the Diverse Experiences of Today's Youth*. The present book builds on themes they developed in those earlier publications, but focuses especially on the target audience of "clinicians who work with conventionally religious clients and families for whom religious dimensions appear to be in conflict with their gender-

identity questions" (6). Yarhouse and Sadusky describe their approach as "balanced, client-centered, and without a fixed outcome" (14). By "balanced" they mean somewhere between the extremes of those who are "critical or dismissive of transgender or gender-diverse experiences" on the one hand, or those who are affirming of such experiences "without sufficient regard for contextual and other issues" (14). "Client-centered" means a posture of listening that allows the client to "sort out" their gender experiences and "determine how to move forward...taking into account their religious faith identity and how their faith informs their decision making" (15). "Without a fixed outcome" means that "our concern is not to push a priori conclusions about the best outcome of a client's gender-identity exploration" (15).

The aim of the book is to provide an overview of this counseling model. In Part One they provide an overview of issues of faith and gender, and how to assess the role of the former in questions of the latter. Part Two discusses particular issues arising from counseling children, while Part Three focuses on different counseling methods for adolescents and adults. They end with a series of case studies in Part Four, demonstrating how their model works out in actual practice.

CRITICAL INTERACTION

There are some helpful tools that the pastor or counselor can glean from Yarhouse and Sadusky's work. For instance, in Chapters Two and Ten they describe a narrative strategy that involves asking counselees to describe their lives as a chapter book: how many chapters are significant? What

are their titles, and why? At the level of technique, this could be a helpful data-generating strategy when coupled with a biblical plan for interpreting and engaging the results.

Yet it is precisely in that last clause that Yarhouse and Sadusky fall short. Their underlying methodology is clearly based on an integrationist philosophy in which psychological and theological categories each have their own validity. This review is not the place to critique this philosophy on its own terms (though the reader should know I am writing from a biblical counseling perspective, shaped heavily by the late David Powlison's teaching). Yet in one sense, for those committed to a biblical view of sexuality and gender, this book is *itself* a critique of the integrationist movement. When integrationist commitments meet LGBT agendas, it is scriptural convictions that suffer.

As an example, consider Yarhouse's concept of "three lenses" by which to understand gender identity struggles, which he first published in *Understanding Gender Dysphoria* and uses as a key premise in this book. These three lenses are "the integrity lens, the disability lens, and the diversity lens" (6). In the first, gender identity is based on "widely held, traditional understandings of male/female differences that reflect sex and gender norms" (6). The disability lens sees "gender atypical behavior as a departure from the norm...[but] does not imbue the lack of congruence with moral significance in the way the integrity, or sacred lens, does" (7). Finally, the diversity lens "views gender incongruence not as a concern to be corrected (integrity) or a condition to sympathize with (disability) but as a



difference in experience that reflects a different kind of person” (7). Yet nowhere do Yarhouse and Sadusky argue for the normativity of any of these lenses. While they indicate some concern (e.g., 15, 108–109) with the potential abuses of the diversity lens, there is no indication that these are not three equally valid and necessary approaches to considering gender. In fact, their methodology assumes the opposite: each of these may be helpful perspectives for the counselor addressing issues of gender identity.

This raises the question: when the diversity lens and the integrity lens come into conflict, which perspective wins? When Scripture is placed on equal terrain with another source of authority, the battle is already lost. There can only be one absolute authority. A counselor cannot serve two masters. By attempting to integrate clinical practices with “religious faith... and religious identity” (5–6), Yarhouse and Sadusky have reduced the latter to a lifestyle preference, one element among many. I fear the result will be destructive to the integrity of the church, and the pastoral care of those who struggle to make sense of their gender in a deeply confused society.

CONCLUSION

I am not implying that Yarhouse and Sadusky’s work is undertaken with subversive intentions. On the contrary, I presume they are attempting to help clinicians understand clients with religious convictions, and help those religious clients to navigate the clinical world. But the danger is that, whereas philosophical disagreements about a counseling issue like bipolar disorder or depression affect a segment of the church, discussions of

“When Scripture is placed on equal terrain with another source of authority, the battle is already lost.”

gender identity affect *all* believers — indeed, all humanity. If Scripture offers “a perspective” on gender identity, then the universal experience of being a man or a woman is now to be interpreted only through listening to a harmony of voices. The integrationist answer to gender identity questions does not cut the Freudian knot, but rather validates its existence and so perpetuates the problem. Only the living and active Word of God, wielded not as one tool among others but as our life-giving, ultimate authority, can both wound and heal, tear down and build up. The question of gender identity — who am I as a man or woman — cannot be answered in any other way. ✕

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REVIEWED BY DAVID TALCOTT

The Future of Christian Marriage

Where is marriage headed for Christians? That is the question Roman Catholic sociologist Mark Regnerus tackles in his new book. He writes “This is a book about how modern Christians around the world look for a mate within a religious faith that esteems marriage but a world that increasingly yawns at it” (2). To answer this, he and his team interviewed 190 young Christians in seven different countries around the world. Each chapter presents stories from these interviews, which adds life to his data-driven arguments. His central contention is that the meaning of marriage has not changed, but our *interest* in marriage has. People generally know what marriage is, but their other beliefs and values mean that marriage increasingly takes a back seat when it comes to concrete life decisions.



Mark Regnerus. *The Future of Christian Marriage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

His introductory chapter documents the decline of marriage around the globe. Though many of us feel this intuitively, the hard data is pretty striking. In 1980 in the Netherlands, for example, 80 percent of women in their late 20s were married or had been married. Currently? Only 20 percent. Not every nation's decline has been that dramatic, but in every nation the movement has been in the downward direction. The question becomes, how are Christians navigating this new environment?

In the second chapter Regnerus argues that Christians' beliefs about the *nature* of marriage have not changed, but our beliefs about *the place of marriage within a well-lived life* have changed dramatically. Based on his interviews, he concludes that young Christians around the world still correctly understand what marriage is: a lifelong union of man and woman for the sake of mutual love and children. However, marriage used to be part of the "foundation" of an adult life, as the launchpad for joint successes. Now, however, it is increasingly viewed as a "capstone," something you enter into at the end, once all the pieces are set in place. On the latter view, marriage is a status achievement only available to people who have already been successful in life, primarily through economic stability ("a career") and personal growth ("finding oneself" through travel, experiences, etc.). But this proves to be a high barrier to entry. Rather than think, "How can I partner with this person and together achieve financial stability and mutual, intertwined growth?" we instead think "I'm not ready for marriage

yet; I haven't done enough with my life and I'm not in a secure enough place." Embracing the capstone model inevitably leads to delayed marriages, which can quickly turn into marriages that never happen. The fertility rate, too, will suffer since delaying childbearing into one's thirties makes high fertility difficult to achieve. The "capstone" view has thus become a major impediment to Christian marriages and pastors should consider the extent to which the church has complacently accepted the culture's understanding of the place of marriage in a well-lived life.

The third chapter may be the most directly relevant to discussions about complementarianism, for in it Regnerus examines how young men and women are adapting to changing expectations of male and female roles in marriage. His general argument is that as more androgyny and interchangeability creep into our idea of marriage and the sexes, the less interest in marriage we will have. More complementarianism, more marriage. More egalitarianism, less marriage. He writes, "Where spouses are functionally interchangeable and basically independent, they simply do not need the marriage" (67). Why would this be? He argues the more we see our potential partners as simply copies of ourselves, the less we think we have to gain by getting married. Though some may bristle, he approaches this through the "Becker Exchange Model of Marriage," which looks at marital unions through the lens of economic analysis. In traditional marriages, men and women specialize and

trade. Men focus on certain things and women focus on other things. Each gains productivity through the specialization, and thus the mutual goods are even greater in the partnership where each party specializes. Further, men and women are not identical by nature, and so the sexes have a comparative advantage over one another when it comes to certain activities (childbearing being the most obvious and unavoidable one). The upshot is this: if we think "he/she is very different from me, he/she brings something to the table which I could never bring," we are much more likely to see the benefits of a marital union with that person. And this doesn't have to happen only at the level of conscious thought. The old poetry of romance, driven by the complementary differences of the sexes, reflects an intuitive heart-knowledge of this same idea. Rejecting gender roles, and sex differences in general, means rejecting one of the real motivations for marriage. More androgyny, fewer marriages. One need not fully accept his "economic" analysis to see the common sense of the conclusion.

Later chapters continue to be insightful and reward a careful reader. Chapter four argues that the separation of sex from marriage and children is a significant driver in the decline of marriage. Using another "economic" analysis of sex and marriage by comparing them to "markets" (i.e. a "market for sex" and a "market for marriage"), he argues the "price of sex" is now lower due to internet pornography, greater numbers of males in prison, and contraception. The latter is crucial, he thinks, since it broadly

separates sex from children, enabling sexual indulgence with reduced natural consequences. Regnerus writes, "It is a key, I hold, to understanding modern relationship dynamics" (105). It drives down the "price of sex" by substantially reducing the potential "cost" represented by unexpected pregnancies. One need not adopt the Roman Catholic view that morally condemns all contraception in order to see the point of his analysis. By dividing sex from children it becomes more practical to divide sex from marriage. By dividing sex from marriage, it becomes more practical to delay marriage to much later in life. Sex before marriage is now the norm, rather than marriage before sex. This chapter particularly builds on themes Regnerus has explored in earlier works.¹

Given the widespread reality of premarital sex within the church, one may wonder whether Regnerus was too quick to conclude that young Christians have the right ideas about the nature of marriage. If we think as a practical matter sex isn't going to be restricted to marriage, are we really thinking correctly about marriage? David J. Ayers of Grove City College, for instance, explores how American culture has indeed shifted ideas about marriage and sex from an ethic of "covenant" to an ethic of "consent."² Doesn't this constitute good evidence of a shift of *thinking* about what is and is not part of marriage? And doesn't an intellectual shift like this better explain the behavior of so many Christians today? Regnerus would likely fall back on his interviews as evidence for his claims. When he talked with young Christians around the world, they were clear

"More complementarianism, more marriage.
More egalitarianism, less marriage."

¹ Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy*, Oxford University Press, 2017, Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America*, Oxford University Press, 2011, and Mark Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, Oxford University Press, 2009.

² See David J. Ayers, *Sex and the Single Evangelical*, Lexham Press, 2022, Ch. 2. Other works also explore a shift to a more consent-based ethic. See, for example O. Carter Snead, *What it Means to be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics*, Harvard University Press, 2020.

they thought of marriage as a covenant.³ That they were unable to successfully make marriage happen is not news — Regnerus knows that well. The question is about what *explains* why they were unsuccessful and is that likely to change going forward? That is the goal of Regnerus's book. Young Christians have an idealized view of the good of marriage, they know it is great and want it for their lives (eventually). But they're having trouble getting there and they don't see it as needful for their personal formation while still young. Is that a shift in thinking about the nature of marriage, or a shift in thinking about where marriage fits in a well-lived human life?

Readers may be inclined to bristle at the idea of doing an "economic analysis" of love and marriage the way that Regnerus does in chapters three and four. But Regnerus is clear that the economic is simply a limited model, not intended to tell the full story. His opening and closing chapters make clear he is not reducing love to a rational business transaction. Given that marriage was ordained for "the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity," economic realities inevitably enter into the analysis of marriage.⁴ Given the huge *economic* partnership involved in forming a common household, raising children, supporting the weak and needy, and the many other economically significant functions carried on by husband and wife, economics will inevitably have something to contribute to our understanding of marriage. The economic modeling is in large part merely helping us see the pre-economic reality behind the model.

One place where readers may more justly quibble with Regnerus comes early in the work in chapter two. There he partially blames the decline of marriage in the West on the Protestant Reformation, which moved marriage from the ecclesiastical to the civil realm.⁵ But Protestants had good reasons for doing so: 1) Marriage is a natural institution, not just a Christian one, and so it is properly regulated by the state and not just the church; 2) Marriage had been devalued in the late medieval church in favor of an emphasis on celibacy and virginity; and 3) Allowing marriage to be privately contracted, like other contracts, led to many conflicts, with one party saying they had vowed marriage and the other saying they hadn't, etc. So having a formal, public means of contracting marriage proves to be very helpful. But this sort of historical speculation is a rare side-trail in the book, the majority of which is wise and helpful in an age of marital trouble such as our own.

In the final chapter, Regnerus asks the question whether Christians are distinguishing themselves from the culture or getting swept along with the culture. The former he calls the "Embattled and Thriving" model, in which a moral minority has a strong self-identity and maintains that identity in the face of moral opposition from the broader culture. The latter he calls the "Moral Communities" model, in which the moral minority is drawn along with the influence of the moral majority. When it comes to Christians and marriage, we are far more "pushed along" than "standing firm." Thus, Regnerus concludes his book somewhat pessimistically, writing "fewer

people are marrying, and I expect that pattern to accelerate rather than slow, at least for a time" (191).

In the past, American culture and cultures around the world were more strongly family-oriented. Regnerus cites Carl Zimmerman's 1947 book *Family and Civilization* and its description of "familism," a system in which the existence and well-being of the family is balanced with and integral to the well-being of individuals. But, over the past century there has occurred a movement away from familism towards more atomistic views of human beings, weakening the cultural support for marriage and family. Thus, again, his reasons for a moderate pessimism. Regnerus has,

weaker confidence the average young adult Christian will resist those forces — described in the earlier chapters of this book — that appear to weaken marriage and emaciate family life. It's not that Christian teaching will change much. It won't. It's just that many Christians themselves have become moral libertarians — content to live and let live (211).

Christians who want to maintain a pro-marriage culture in their churches and communities will have to be much more intentional in creating a genuine counter-culture. Regnerus thinks there will be pockets where marriage flourishes, but they will be unique, thick communities. He predicts that a minority of Christian young people,

will continue to thwart cultural pressures. Almost always these resisters are deeply embedded in religious communities — small

groups, tight-knit congregations, or religious subcommunities. These are the sources of vibrant marital subcultures and will stand out from the surrounding culture. But do not overestimate their size (211).

Marriage is a natural reality. It was established by God in the garden and man can refashion it only within certain limits. The need for pastors, Regnerus argues, is not to argue for a specific "vision" of marriage against the culture, but rather "they simply need to stably assert what marriage *is*, and what it will continue to be" (211). Marriage *is* what God has created it to be, we simply need to reassert it and foster counter-cultural communities where we can live it.

Overall, Regnerus's work offers great insight for pastors, youth leaders, professors, and others who are in a position of helping young Christians navigate this new world. ✕

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³ See a large number of examples that Regnerus brings forward in Chapter Two, particularly pages 32-34.

⁴ "Form of the Solemnization of Matrimony," *The 1662 Book of Common Prayer* International Edition, IVP Academic, 2021.

⁵ See page 26 for this argument.

Embodied: Living as Whole People in a Fractured World



Gregg R. Allison. *Embodied: Living as Whole People in a Fractured World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2021.

The human body can be a neglected aspect of our Christian theology, but it is at the center of current cultural attention. We acknowledge that our bodies are part of the way God made us, but at times we can hold to a gnostic view that dispenses with thinking much of the body since we will simply slough it off someday. However, this kind of attitude among Christians can overlook the attention the world is giving to the body and, more importantly, misunderstands biblical teaching on how we are to think of ourselves as embodied beings. Increasingly, questions are posed regarding sexuality, physical presence in a particular space, and transhumanism, each of which touch on aspects of our being embodied beings.

Gregg Allison, professor of Christian Theology at Southern Seminary, delves into a variety of topics related to the human body in an effort to help readers understand and apply sound biblical-theological truth. Again, this kind of effort is essentially cultural, as all manner of questions are being asked

and efforts made to deny our God-given embodied realities. Theologically, the idea of embodiment touches upon every major area of doctrine in some fashion. Thus, it is essential that readers engage with such teaching for the sake of their convictions and the ways they live and speak in the world.

Allison's book is broken down in a very consistent way, progressing through pertinent topics in a helpful fashion. Each chapter begins with a chart, which highlights the overall direction of the chapter, detailing what topic the reader will consider, the big idea, which is teased out biblically and theologically, and then offers application, usually consisting of diagnostic questions. Each chapter also has a section entitled "For the Curious," which delves into further ideas that typically address present cultural issues for the church to address. Within the actual chapters, the author speaks of the creation of the body, sex and gender, that we are particular individuals with a particular context, sociality, sexuality, the incarnation of the Son of God, the sanctification of the body, blessings experienced and discipline needed for the body, worship as an embodied being, clothing, suffering and healing, death of the body, and the future of the body.

The foundation of Allison's work rests on twin claims: God designed and created us to be embodied individuals and we are our bodies (more specifically, we are embodied souls). These points are amply demonstrated and serve as foundation for



everything else the author claims. Because we are designed and created by God and because we are embodied souls, there are implications for the way we steward our bodies, are sanctified, how we worship, what it means to die, and what we can expect at the resurrection. Allison's book persuasively demonstrates that engaging with these often neglected truths is crucial for our overall theology.

This work is helped by clear definitions throughout, as well as a willingness to tackle the many difficult issues inherent in anthropology in general and embodiment specifically. Allison's strongest sections include his chapters on gender and sanctification. Certainly, gender and sexuality must always be spoken of from a biblical worldview, but the need for such teaching is especially vital in today's society. With so much talk surrounding gender dysphoria, sex-reassignment surgeries, and transgender ideology, the author astutely summarizes biblical teaching on the various topics and issues appropriate application. In a day where we are pressed toward androgyny on the one hand or toward the absolute distinctiveness of the genders on the other, Allison warrants his case to say, "Men and women uniquely express common human traits as men and women. . . . To illustrate this view, capacities such as reasoning, emotion, will, and purposing aren't gender-specific but are common human capacities that are and will inherently be expressed by women and men in ways that reflect their femaleness and maleness" (47). It would have been helpful if the author had pressed this idea more into the kinds of roles men and women are called into in certain contexts, but Allison brings helpful balance to the conversation.

The chapter on the sanctified body also deserves attention. While people often think of sanctification in terms of "spiritual" issues, they can overlook the spiritual aspect of glorifying God in our body. As such, Allison calls out such sins as lust, gluttony, and sloth, the latter rarely receiving attention. These sins are deadly, and we need to recognize that overcoming such sinful habits as embodied beings is essential to our spiritual growth. He also addresses physical wellness through sleep and rest (work is covered in a different chapter). As with the entire book, the author addresses these issues biblically and theologically, but also

gives a number of practical insights and suggestions for our pursuit of proper rest. It is not spiritual to avoid such matters, our body is important because we were designed and created by God, and he calls us to be good stewards.

In what is an excellent book overall, two shortcomings should be noted. First, there were times where Allison raised certain questions, which were good and fitting, but didn't answer them. This is especially true in the application section of each chapter. While there are exceptions, much of the content in these sections consisted of diagnostic questions, which are helpful, but some could receive more definitive answers. This is particularly the case if such a work would be used in a church small group or class. Another example would be in the chapter on worship, where Allison addresses tattoos and body markings in his "For the Curious" section. Again, there are some excellent questions, but readers may be looking for more definitive guidance.

A second shortcoming, which was more of a missed opportunity, was the neglect of dealing with the need to physically gather in worship (or not). We are not entirely sure where the author lands on this issue because he does not address it. However, in our recent days of the pandemic when many churches closed their doors for physical worship gatherings, it would seem there was an opportunity to address such a timely issue. There is certainly literature that has come out in the last couple of years that the author could reflect upon and then offer a biblical response.

Overall, Allison's work is a breath of fresh air in its clarity, scope, and orientation toward application. Such a work should be read by pastors and given to other leaders for use in church life. We face many anthropological issues in our day, and Allison gives us the kind of guidance we need to be educated within the church and to engage with those outside the church. ✕

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REVIEWED BY BETSY HOWARD

Spending the Winter



Joseph Bottum's poetry collection *Spending the Winter* (2022) offers a world of longing, of poetic echoes, and of laughter worked out in the lavishness of language. Bottum borrows the title of his collection from the fifth and final division of his book, as well as the final poem of the collection. If the titular repetition of "Spending the Winter" underscores winter's sustained presence throughout, other poems — including the opening "Easter Morning" as well as "A London Frost Fair," "Feast of the Annunciation," and "Some Come to See the Lord: A Christmas Carol" — address winter directly, while "What Falls Was Green" and "Still Life" sustain the wintering theme from the vantage of aging and time's ruthless passing. The sweeping meditation on transience in "What Falls Was Green," for example, grieves over "waste" and the "loss" of everything from the organic matter to human intention while it simultaneously cultivates humility. Pedagogically, I found

the poem a compelling companion to Percy Shelley's ironic treatment of permanence in his "Ozymandias" (1818), and I paired the two poems to launch my Ancient Greek Literature course this fall.

Bottum also places winter in conversation with the other seasons. The collection's fourth section, "Occasionals," opens with "Four Seasons," subtitled "A Graduation Poem," that picks up each season in turn. In "The Four Seasons," Bottum is quick to turn references to early spring into repartees within the large English poetic canon; Bottum's April rains invoke both modernist T.S. Eliot and medieval Geoffrey Chaucer. *Spending the Winter* also resonates with the seasonal theme recurrent across Bottum's other works, including his 2001 poetry collection *The Fall and Other Poems* and *The Second Spring* (2011), a compilation of new, popular, and folk tunes alongside arrangements of poems set to music.

While the collection is hardly circumscribed by winter — Bottum takes winter as a launching point rather than its boundary — his frame for the coldest, darkest season not only engages but also disciples contemporary America's cultural fascination with metaphorical winter — or what we experience as extended seasons of scarcity, burn out, shut down, and seeming unproductivity. Katherine May's *New York Times* best-selling memoir *Wintering* (2019) best captures our current preoccupation with ongoing lack by turning the noun winter into the gerund wintering. May's essays pace with those who "toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow," as the old advent hymn describes. In winter's severity and uncertainty, she celebrates its bizarre wonders like the liquid fat under the skin of hibernating dormice to ice bathing. But May is adamant in her conclusion that winter has no dénouement, often no narrative arc, and therefore no promise of resolution. Not so for Bottum.

Spending the Winter opens with a resurrection poem in which Bottum resolves the bloodshed of Druidic rites and ritualized pagan longings in Easter, just as Easter, in the northern hemisphere, divides winter from spring. Bottum's primary interlocutor in this first piece is René Girard, to whom the poem is dedicated. Girard's anthropological study of the relationship between communal violence and ritual religion (*Violence and the Sacred*, 1972) frames the poem's argument: Bottum's young daughter running through the barely blooming dogwoods embodies resurrection hope against the backdrop of human suffering, experienced acutely in pagan rites of



Joseph Bottum. *Spending the Winter*. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2022.

"grief / By grief, pain by vengeful pain," but also echoed in the modern world of wars and ecological disasters where "innocence will come to grief." This first poem, "Easter Morning," ends with the promise of "All that was lost, rudely broken, / Crossed in love" coming "rising, rising." Resurrection is the first note Bottum establishes. So too his collection ends with embodied hope in "Spending the Winter," where Bottum delights in winter's habituated daily rhythms — "Each daily need, each daylight chore / keeps us in time, like a music score" — that keep our hearts tender by demanding a "But stop" to our indulging fears that all might be meaningless. In "Spending the Winter," the lull of these routines also makes remembering possible and precious even as it encourages us to delight in the world's subtle but persistent particularity. Bottum's "This *this*" is his affirmation of Gerard Manley Hopkins's *inscape*, which Hopkins, in turn, borrowed from Duns Scotus's *haecceitas*. In "Spending the

Winter,” the particularity of reality is itself an argument against niggling nihilism.

Many of Bottum’s “Trifles” from the collection’s third section made me laugh out loud. “Reading by Osmosis” plays in the nineteenth-century nonsense tradition of Edward Lear with a significant nod to Dr. Seuss; it almost begs to be read aloud, if not sung. Its effusive celebration of ignorance pairs convictingly with the ironic Gnosticism of “Ascetic’s Prayer” from the book’s first section. The brilliance of “Going Steady” lies in its obstinately forsaking its titular theme until the last line, and the humor of “My Last Dutch Oven’s” relies principally on Bottum’s reinvigorating and trivializing Robert Browning’s dark, murderous dramatic monologue “My Last Duchess” (1842). Sometimes the humor is cultivated in the pairing of the poems: “An Adulterer’s Introspection” evokes a wry, rueful smile on its own, but its pairing with “The Logician’s Lament” extends the play with deduction and fidelity across the page spread.

Bottum’s “Imitations,” the collection’s second section offers, perhaps, the most generative poems of the book as each poem introduces the reader to new-old poet friends or revives our familiarity with a particular prosodic form. In Bottum’s “The Transit of Venus,” we not only come to know the planet Venus afresh, led on by the alliterative string of her “wantonly wasting / Wonders on strangers at dusk,” but we also meet the seventeenth-century astronomer Jeremiah Horrocks and his own verse. In “Saro’s Love Song,” Bottum introduces us to a contemporary Kurdish journalist Sardasht Osman, his kidnapping and murder, and his edgy poetic political critiques. I had never heard of William Baker or Vincent Bourne, but Bottum’s imitations left me wanting to. This section’s generosity points the reader outside of Bottum’s collection towards others. At the same time, by providing only the sparsest context, Bottum risks leaving his reader feeling like a bewildered outsider. Any poem written in conversation with an earlier poem threatens to leave readers

with the embarrassing sense that they have missed half the conversation. For example, Bottum’s original publication of “Saro’s Love Song” in *First Things* in 2010 is accompanied by a paragraph of context; in its inclusion in *Spending the Winter*, we are given less than a sentence to orient ourselves. Bottum’s “Imitations” left me pinned between a desire to hunt for the initial poems prompting Bottum and a simultaneous desire to own my own ignorance and simply enjoy his new echoic versions for their own sakes.

Spending the Winter takes seriously the joys and sorrows of human reality in light of both the incarnation and the resurrection. Its title positions winter as an economic resource to be spent, and if spent, to be stewarded. Not unlike his 2008 essay “How We Spend Our Evenings,” in which Bottum reviews a spontaneous “hootenanny” following a *First Things* board meeting, Bottum’s collection obliquely prods its readers, in the spirit of Annie Dillard, towards prudential introspection: how

will we spend our winters, and in turn, our lives? If Bottum’s title moves us to reckon with a literal or metaphorical winter’s length and, in turn, learn to steward our time and attention through it, his collection itself is an answer: one could do far worse than give many cold, dark wintry nights to Bottum’s verse. In an age when, as Bottum has observed elsewhere, poetry is often unread or discussed only in closed-off literary circles, Bottum offers us poetry to take up in quiet or share out loud. The collection also inspires a range of activities for the reader to practice cultivating — whether the contemplation of our own mortality or the disciplined delight of imitation or wrangling a hootenanny into verse. Here in Minnesota, the increasingly sharp chill in the air confirms for me what Bottum offers and models: in winter, there is time; there will be time. ✕

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*Know that the LORD
Himself is God;
It is He who has made
us, and not we ourselves;
We are His people and the
sheep of His pasture.*

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