

**ACT LIKE MEN**  
*Kevin DeYoung*

**A BIBLICAL ELDERSHIP IS A  
MALE ONLY ELDERSHIP**  
*Alexander Strauch*

**THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE AND  
THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD: AN  
EXEGETICAL AND DOGMATIC  
ACCOUNT**  
*Kyle Claunch*

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# Editorial: The Toxic War on Fatherhood

The Apostle Paul teaches in Ephesians 3:15 that from God the Father is named “every family in heaven and on earth.” Notably, the ESV includes a translation note that reveals an etymological connection between “Father” (πατήρ) and “family” (πατριά): literally, it is all *fatherhood* in heaven and on earth that is named from God the Father. An entire response to feminism’s revolt against God’s creation design is housed *en miniature* in this word and its translation. How can a word that literally means “fatherhood” be faithfully translated “family”? Could it have something to do with the God-ordained principle of male headship? Paul certainly seems to teach accordingly later on in the same letter in Ephesians 5.

But this is not the approach I aim to take on Ephesians 3:15 in this editorial, which is written in service of introducing you to the Fall 2023 issue of *Eikon*, Volume 5, Issue 2. The theme of this issue is fatherhood and masculinity. Both are under siege in the West

— and not for unrelated reasons. As Nancy Pearcey points out in her new book, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, which Steven Wedgworth ably and thoroughly reviews in these pages, there is something toxic in the air. But contrary to what our effeminate and emasculated culture-makers would have you believe, it is not masculinity. What *is* toxic is the feminist war on masculinity being waged under the false pretense that masculinity is the problem.

Arch-feminist Mary Daly once quipped, “If God is male, then male is God.” The obvious entailments write themselves. If God is male, and male is God, where does that leave women? Either worshiping men as God, or rejecting both altogether. Notice how this seems to mirror the news cycle today. But confessional Christians everywhere reject Daly’s premise.

God is not male, because he does not have a body. God is Spirit (John 4:24). But as Kyle

Claunch deftly demonstrates in his must-read treatise in this issue, *God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, and fatherhood is an essential attribute of God. God is not male, but his self-revelation is masculine. Which brings us back to Ephesians 3:15.

To appropriate Daly, if God is Father, and if all fatherhood and every family is named from him (Eph. 3:15), and if progressivism's stated goals involve "disrupting" both (as a 2020 Black Lives Matter campaign reminded the world), where does that leave God? Naturally, he must be "disrupted" too. If fatherhood is named from God the Father, then in order to take on the branch, as it were, you cannot ignore the root. The only question that remains is, what came first? The rampant, feminist-fueled hatred for fatherhood and masculinity, or hatred for God? Romans 1 leads us to conclude that those who hate manhood — a hatred that cannot be cordoned off from a hatred of womanhood, as LGBT activists have thoroughly established through their faux-trans-masquerades — have a prior hatred toward God.

The attempt to "disrupt" God has taken on many forms. Some — even some self-professing evangelicals — have rejected God's masculine self-revelation, opting for gender-neutral pronouns to refer to God, or worse, assigning God names like Mother that he never takes to himself (see the Spring 2023 issue of *Eikon* for our head-on engagement with this error). Let it be clear: we do not name God. He names himself, and he has named himself Father.

But it is not enough to insist on confessing the fatherhood of God. We know God through his creation and word, and those who are at war with the natural family and

fatherhood are at war with God's revelation — both books, Nature and Scripture. But we believe fatherhood and masculinity are not only good, they are true and beautiful, which is why you will not find us apologizing for them in this issue. Instead, we promote fatherhood and masculinity, because when we promote these we promote human flourishing in their complements: motherhood and femininity.

As Calvin says in the opening sentence of his *Institutes*, "Our wisdom, insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other." This is how we ought to engage what Pearcey has called *The Toxic War on Masculinity*. It is an assault on what God has created, which makes it an assault on God himself. In the pages that follow, join Kevin DeYoung, Alexander Strauch, Steven Wedgworth, Calvin Robinson, and a host of other writers who take up the Sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17) for both defense and offense in the all out cosmic war "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). ✕

Colin J. Smothers  
Executive Editor, *Eikon*  
November 2023

# John Gill's Four P's of Masculinity

A short time before his death, eighteenth-century London Baptist pastor John Gill (1697–1771) put the finishing touches on his monumental *Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*. Near the end of this work — which comprised a summary of the doctrine he had taught over the course of his fifty-one year ministry to the same congregation — Gill turned his attention to *practical theology*, the study of theology that concerns itself with the proper worship of God.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing from Ephesians 5:33, Gill summed up the duties of husbands and

wives to one another as love and reverence.<sup>2</sup> Husbands, he instructed, are called to love their wives while wives are called to revere (that is, respect) their husbands.

Gill then outlined how husbands should love their wives in four points, articulating characteristics of what complementarians have recognized as biblical masculinity. These four points can be summarized in four words: provide, protect, pastor, and please.<sup>3</sup>

According to Gill, the husband has a particular responsibility to *provide* for

<sup>1</sup> John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity: Or, A System of Evangelical Truths, Deduced from the Sacred Scriptures*, 1839 ed.; repr. (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 1989), 697.

<sup>2</sup> In context, Gill's use of the term "reverence" indicates a wife's respect for her husband, out of worship to God, in recognition of his God-given authority in marriage.

<sup>3</sup> In her latest book, Nancy Pearcey reports that David Gilmore's cross-cultural study on manhood, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (1990), "found that virtually all cultures share the expectation that the Good Man performs what he calls the three Ps: protect, provide, and procreate (become a father)." Nancy R. Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2023), 200. Similarly, Gill's teaching on masculinity can be summarized in four P's.





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his wife. The husband is to “nourish” and “cherish” his wife as his own body (Eph 5:29), which includes “food and raiment, and all the necessaries of life.” Those who do not, Gill noted, are worse than unbelievers (1 Tim. 5:8).<sup>4</sup>

The husband not only provides, but *protects* his wife “from all abuses and injuries” as she is the weaker vessel (1 Pet. 3:7). The husband’s responsibility may call him “to expose himself to danger, and even risk his life in her defense, and for her rescue” (1 Sam. 30:5, 18).<sup>5</sup>

Faithful husbandry also demands that each husband seeks the spiritual welfare of his wife. In other words, he should be

the spiritual leader — the *pastor* — of the marriage. The Christian husband should be active in seeking the salvation of an unconverted wife, and the “spiritual peace, comfort, and edification” of a believing spouse. The Christian husband, according to Gill, should lead his wife as a fellow “heir with him of the grace of life” in all forms of spiritual devotion.<sup>6</sup>

These three ways of loving one’s wife are commonplace in complementarian parlance, and rightly so. Yet Gill added to these that a husband should be concerned to *please* his wife. Husbands, Gill contended, should do “every thing that may contribute to her pleasure, peace, comfort, and happiness.” Gill relied

<sup>4</sup> Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 975.

<sup>5</sup> Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 975.

<sup>6</sup> Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 975.

upon 1 Corinthians 7:33 to establish this husbandly duty, and made sure to point out that a husband should not be scorned for pleasing his wife, but that he should rather be encouraged to fulfill his responsibility to please his wife.<sup>7</sup>

The pleasing husband, Gill explained, neither sows strife nor exposes his wife's sins and failures, but rather lovingly bears with and enshrouds them (Prov. 10:12).

Gill recognized that wives are also called to please their husbands (1 Cor 7:34), teaching that "both parties should consult each other's pleasure, peace, comfort, and happiness, and especially the glory of God."<sup>8</sup> But taking his cues from Scripture, he knew that men are to please their wives *as husbands*, and that women are to please their husbands *as wives*. Thus, even though husbands and wives are called to please one another, each pleases the other uniquely through their God-given role as husband and wife.

The godly husband, then, seeks to be a source of pleasure and happiness for his wife by lovingly giving of himself to sacrificially provide for her needs, selflessly protecting her with his very life, and by spiritually leading her into communion with Christ. The husband fulfills this masculine mandate with Christ's love for the church as his driving motivation and enduring example.<sup>9</sup>

Gill proved not only a reliable teacher of God's word, but a living example of godly masculinity. All accounts of Gill's marriage reveal that he adored and cherished his wife Elizabeth.<sup>10</sup> Within a year of starting his ministry in London, Elizabeth experienced a miscarriage — one of many pregnancies that ended in miscarriage or stillbirth — that left her bedridden for an extended period of time. During this season of affliction, Gill lavishly attended to her needs, which provoked the criticism of some in the church who believed Elizabeth feigned illness. Over and again, Gill demonstrated his love for Elizabeth in his constant and attentive care to her during many seasons of illness. In this way, Gill proved to be the pleasing husband about whom he taught.<sup>11</sup>

John Gill's biblical vision and example of marital masculinity stands as a needed corrective to the disorderly egalitarian, destructively passive, and disastrously macho versions of masculinity that our confused culture has put forth in recent decades. Masculinity does not need to be reimagined, but restored. Rather than paving revolutionary roads, the church ought to trod the ancient paths. ✕

*Jonathan E. Swan is Managing Editor of Eikon and Associate Pastor of Education and Discipleship at First Baptist Church O'Fallon, MO.*

<sup>7</sup> Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 975.

<sup>8</sup> Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 976. The phraseology "masculine mandate" is borrowed from Richard D. Phillips, *The Masculine Mandate: God's Calling to Men* (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, 975-976.

<sup>10</sup> Representative examples include John Rippon, *A Brief Memoir of the Life and Writings of the Late Rev. John Gill, D.D.* (1838 repr. Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 2006), 9-10; Sharon James, "The Weaker Vessel: John Gill's Reflections on Women, Marriage, and Divorce," in *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697-1771): A Tercentennial Appreciation*, ed. Michael A.G. Haykin, *Studies in the History of Christian Thought* 77 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 216-217; and Matthew David Haste, "Marriage in the Life and Theology of John Gill, Samuel Stennett, and Andrew Fuller" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 92-94.

<sup>11</sup> B. R. White, "John Gill in London (1719-1729): A Biographical Fragment," *Baptist Quarterly* 22 (1967): 82-84. George M. Ella, *John Gill and the Cause of God and Truth* (Durham, NC: Go, 1995), 56-58. Sharon James, "The Weaker Vessel: John Gill's Reflections on Women, Marriage, and Divorce," in *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697-1771): A Tercentennial Appreciation*, ed. Michael A.G. Haykin, *Studies in the History of Christian Thought* 77 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 216-217. Matthew David Haste, "Marriage in the Life and Theology of John Gill, Samuel Stennett, and Andrew Fuller" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 93.

JAMES M. HAMILTON, JR.

# Karl Marx Has Won the Culture: But He Will Not Win the War

The debate about biblical manhood and womanhood has moved beyond word studies and disputes about the flow of thought in Paul's Epistles.<sup>1</sup> As summarized in an account of "Feminisms, Then and Now,"

From the outset of second-wave feminist activism in the 1960s, the three main branches of feminism were liberal, materialist, and radical. Liberal feminism worked incrementally to extend all the rights and freedoms of a liberal society to women. . . . Materialist feminists were concerned

with how patriarchy and capitalism act together to constrain women, especially within environments like the workplace and the home. Thus, their theories drew on to varying degrees Marxism and socialism more broadly. Radical feminists foregrounded patriarchy and viewed women and men as oppressed and oppressor classes.<sup>2</sup>

We are faced with a culture that views the male-female binary as an oppressive construct. And in response, the culture rages and plots in vain, as the power

<sup>1</sup> This essay was originally given as an address at the CBMW Annual Banquet at the Evangelical Theological Society, November 14, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2020), 137.

brokers set themselves and those in authority to take counsel together against the Lord and his anointed, seeking to burst their bonds and cast away their cords.

## KARL MARX HAS WON THE CULTURE

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The cultural Marxists are pursuing the destabilization of norms, and those norms are the objective truths about created reality — things like “male and female he created them.” I am of the opinion that these doctrines of demons represent an alternative religion against which it is our duty to stand.

To give an anecdotal illustration: Two girls in our church, an eleven-year-old and her fourteen-year-old sister, recently met girls their own ages in a public place. Both were asked by separate little girls on different occasions: “Do you like girls or boys?” These encounters took place, not in San Francisco or New York City, but in Louisville, Kentucky.

The loss of the givenness that, for instance, little girls will like little boys represents the successful destabilization of norms, or “hegemonic discourses,” as Antonio Gramsci terms them, whereby the assumption that little girls will like little boys can no longer be made. This “blurring of boundaries” is exactly what things like Drag Queen Story Hour are designed to achieve. The drag queens, by the way, have made it all the way to Jackson, Tennessee. The offensive and perverse sexualization of the public library is meant to call into question fixed categories of male and female. As Helen Pluckrose and James

Lindsay explain, Queer theorists hold that “we should believe sex, gender, and sexuality to be social constructs, not because it’s necessarily true, but because it is *easier to politicize them and demand change* if they are social constructs than if they are biological.”<sup>3</sup>

The water in which we swim is a toxic brew of Marxism, postmodern philosophy, and expressive individualism. It is an alternative religion, a false gospel, as has been observed:

Social Justice Theorists have created a new religion, a tradition of faith . . . a postmodern faith based on a dead God, which sees mysterious worldly forces in systems of power and privilege and which sanctifies victimhood.<sup>4</sup>

We must take our thoughts and our tastes captive by the knowledge of Christ. Here are the strongholds that need destroying. These are the lofty opinions and arguments raised up against the knowledge of God (2 Cor. 10:4–5). We must bring taste into line with the truth. We must disciple people so that they know the difference between the worldview of Critical Theory and Christianity. The formation of a Christian worldview requires a biblical-theological understanding of who we are and where we live, and biblical theology will also equip us to notice the typological patterns in the way the serpent and his seed keep trying the same things in new ways.

Biblical theology is the attempt to understand and embrace the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors.<sup>5</sup> That

<sup>3</sup> Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 99.

<sup>4</sup> Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 210–11 (emphasis original).

<sup>5</sup> See James M. Hamilton Jr., *What Is Biblical Theology?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014).

interpretive perspective, or worldview, has an overarching master story, from which those authors derive (1) truths, doctrines, and dogmas, (2) symbols, imagery, and patterns, and (3) values, ethics, and culture. In the Psalms and other expressions of worship (Exod. 15, the hymns in the New Testament, etc.), the liturgical expressions of worship reinforce the truths by activating symbols to build culture.

In other words, the master narrative explains where the world came from, who human beings are, what has gone wrong, and what God has done, is doing, and has promised to do to set things right in the end. Thus the master narrative inspires faith in God and provokes those who believe to respond to him with thanks and praise. The master narrative also generates symbolism and imagery that summarize, interpret, and portend what has been and will be. In the narrative we find recurring patterns whose significance escalates with each new repetition.<sup>6</sup> And the explanation given in the Bible for why God began the project, how he has orchestrated it and to what *telos*, is that God seeks to set the fullness of his glory on display. He does this as he makes known his character as a righteous God who upholds his own word when he judges, setting the backdrop and context for the simultaneous display of his character as a merciful God when he forgives and saves the repentant who believe. That is to say, the center of biblical theology is the glory of God in salvation through judgment.<sup>7</sup>

I rehearse this definition of biblical theology and its central claim to be grounded in God's revelation of his own character because I want to set the biblical worldview in contrast with what seems to be the predominant worldview that informs the rejection of the Bible's teaching on how human beings have been created male and female with specified responsibilities. Paul speaks of those who "depart from the faith" to embrace alternative worldviews that inform alternative ways of living as "devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared" (1 Tim. 4:1–2). Note that this comment follows hard on the heels of his statement that he does "not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man" (2:12), shortly after which he explains that he writes so that Timothy might "know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (3:15).

Carl Trueman explains how the Marxist worldview works:

Take, for example, Christianity's teaching, taught from myriad pulpits over the years, that husbands and wives should be faithful to each other, should not drink too much, and should work hard and honestly for their masters or employers. A Christian might see these as imperatives because they are the will of God and the means by which human beings, made in his image, can flourish. Marx,

<sup>6</sup> For more on typology, see James M. Hamilton Jr., *Typology—Understanding the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns: How Old Testament Expectations Are Fulfilled in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> For discussion of this idea, see James M. Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

*“I contend that Marxism represents exactly the ‘teachings of demons’ that Paul warned of in 1 Timothy 4:1-2 and is advanced by ‘the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared.’”*

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however, would see such a belief as mystical nonsense. For him, these imperatives are the means by which the middle-class employers make sure that their workers are the kind of people who make up a stable, sober, obedient workforce. And he would interpret the grounding of these imperatives in religious arguments simply as a manipulative way of granting them an absolute moral authority that cannot be challenged.<sup>8</sup>

And thus, apart from the vast majority of people ever having read Marx, we can feel within ourselves — in our instinctual responses and tastes — how the wider culture will respond to someone with same-sex desires or “gender dysphoria” resisting temptation, embracing his or her God-given sex, and seeking to uphold a biblical sexual ethic. They will say the same about that person that they would about a Christian woman happily embracing a submissive posture to her husband’s authority. For those who belong

to “The Church of the Sexual Revolution,”<sup>9</sup> these manifestations of Christian faithfulness represent expressions of false-consciousness. The oppressed have simply taken on the perspective of their oppressors, because the oppressors have successfully indoctrinated those whom they seek to manipulate for their own advantage.

Karl Marx has won the culture.

For the Marxists, racism, sexism, and homophobia are interlocking forms of oppression. To the extent that the distinctions between male and female, the Bible’s moral norms for how they are to relate to one another, and the Bible’s authority structures for men and women are viewed as sexism, I contend that Marxism represents exactly the “teachings of demons” that Paul warned of in 1 Timothy 4:1-2 and is advanced by “the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared.”

<sup>8</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 56–57.

<sup>9</sup> Carl R. Trueman, “The Church of the Sexual Revolution,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Friday, November 11, 2022, A17.

Biblical theology, however, will help us to see that the serpent who tempted Eve in the garden in Genesis 3 animates the false teachers who are to be crushed under the feet of the seed of the woman in the church in Rome (Rom. 16:17–20). Paul likewise identifies the serpent who deceived Eve with those who preach another Jesus, offer a different spirit, and hold forth a different gospel in Corinth (2 Cor. 11:3–4). The serpent remains active today with his distortions and lies, and he fundamentally wants to destroy the family. As Carl Trueman observes in *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, “The destruction of marriage, of the sexual codes that justify it, and of the institutions that enforce and police it is therefore central to the liberation of humanity and to the cause of justice.”<sup>10</sup>

Karl Marx has won the culture, but he cannot win the war.

#### **KARL MARX CANNOT WIN THE WAR**

Marx cannot win the war because God made a promise about the seed of the woman. God then ensured the line of descent from which the seed would come. God ordained praise from the mouths of babes and infants. He chose the weak things of the world and the things that are not. He made Moses, who protested that he was “not a man of words” (Exod. 4:10), his prophet, and Moses wrote of the one to come. Moses also wrote of the way God made the world:

Male and female he created them  
(Gen. 1:27).

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28).

Israel had an all-male priesthood, and Israel was a patriarchal society. Note what Pluckrose and Lindsay say about this word “patriarchy,”

Feminist thought could no longer understand “patriarchy” as the literal “rule of the fathers” (and husbands), but instead as, in Foucauldian terms, vague notions of male dominance permeating every discourse.<sup>11</sup>

But husbands and fathers led in ancient Israel, and the New Testament indicates that husbands and fathers are likewise to lead in the church. Jesus named only male apostles. In their letters, both Peter and Paul instruct wives to submit to their own husbands. And across the New Testament, pastors/elders/overseers are to be men.

Here I want to cite a feminist distortion to guard against a potential error. In their discussion of Simone de Beauvoir, Pluckrose and Lindsay note that “it was . . . understood that the construction of gender makes men the default sex and heterosexuality the default sexuality, with women and homosexuality constructed in a position of otherness to these.”<sup>12</sup>

The distortion is that women are not as valuable, not as central, not as important as men.

Shout it from the rooftops, again, that God

<sup>10</sup> 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), 153.

<sup>11</sup> Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 143.

<sup>12</sup> Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 144.

made them male and female, and that had the woman had no seed there would be no salvation. The Marxified culture assumes that women only have value if they do what men do. Biblical theology would teach us the incalculable value of women managing the household, having children, and being the shapers of the everlasting splendors in their most formative stages of life. Everything Paul has to say about older and younger women in passages such as Titus 2:3–5 is more significant than our culture has begun to imagine.

While on the topic of feminist distortions, let us say a word about “Hegemonic masculinity,” which “refers to dominant forms of masculinity, which are understood to maintain men’s superiority over women and perpetuate aggressive and competitive expressions of maleness, which are socially enforced by hegemonic — dominant and powerful — discourses around what it means to be a ‘real man.’”<sup>13</sup>

Whatever feminists may think about what it means to be a real man, the Bible teaches that Christ embodies it. Whereas Adam stood idly by when the serpent tempted Eve, whereas Abraham and Isaac passed their wives off as their sisters, and whereas a long line of abusers and failures of manhood dot the pages of Scripture, Jesus of Nazareth stepped forward and said, “if you seek me, let these men go” (John 18:8).

True manhood does not use others for his own benefit. Jesus gave himself for the benefit of others. And that Christlike model of self-sacrifice is the kind of love to which Paul calls every husband (Eph. 5:25). Indeed, it is the kind of leadership



<sup>13</sup> Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 154.



to which Jesus has called all who would follow him.


The self-giving of the Lord Jesus is like the little stone cut out by no human hand in Daniel's vision. Karl Marx has won the culture, and the kingdoms are represented in the materials of the statue. But that gospel rock strikes the feet of iron and clay, and all the kingdoms Karl Marx has won become "like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth" (Dan. 2:35).

God's Christ has conquered, and he will return to consummate his inaugurated kingdom. While we wait, the nations are raging, trying to burst his bonds and cast away his cords. It is ours to understand and embrace the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors, to see the patterns in the narrative and then to align those with the patterns of our own experience: the seed of the woman could only come if women are saved through childbearing, and the human race will only continue if men and women embrace their created sexual identities, enter into marriage, and do together what God commanded in Genesis 1:28. The serpent hates the woman and her seed, and he hates Christ and his church.

He will roar with all his pseudo-righteous indignation against the way the seed of the woman supposedly oppress and harm by upholding the word of God against those who mutilate children and shepherd them down the path to destruction. He tries to claim the moral high ground, but he will never have it: "Those who forsake the law praise the wicked, but those who keep the

law strive against them" (Prov. 28:4). And,

"Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him"

But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls (Heb. 10:37-38). 

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# A Masculine Mandate for Today

I come from a cavalry family — as in horse soldiers. My grandfather commanded the US Army’s last cavalry regiment, until we shifted to tanks together with the rest of the twentieth century. Given this background, I am steeped in the old cavalry movies, the greatest of which is John Wayne’s *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*. Portraying Captain Nathan Briddles, a grizzled Civil War veteran facing the end of his career, this cavalry classic unleashes a torrent of manly quips. According to Captain Briddles, true manliness can be summed up in two words: *Never apologize*.

When I became a Christian, I learned that not every manly saying in John Wayne movies should be adopted. “Never apologize” sounds great in theory, but in practice it may combine with a man’s sin nature to make him overbearing and arrogant. Yet it turns out that the biblical ideal of manhood may also be summed up in two words. They are found in Genesis 2:15, which contain the Lord’s calling to the first man, Adam, for his life in the Garden of Eden.

The creation account in Genesis 1 and 2 supplies a wealth of information regarding God’s design for human society, including men. Genesis 1:27 states that “God created man in his own image . . . male and female he created them,” stating that God created two sexes of equal value and dignity. Genesis 2:7 says that “the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground,” showing that mankind is specially created by God and not the product of evolution. Moreover, God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,” so that man is a spiritual being designed for covenant union with God through faith and obedience.

Armed with all this useful information, Genesis 2:15 goes on to provide the *how* of biblical manhood: *how* is the distinctive male calling lived out? I have called this verse the “Masculine Mandate,” because it establishes the architecture of biblical manhood in a way that is confirmed throughout Scripture. It is blessedly direct and to the point: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15). At the heart of this calling are two words that shape the biblical view of manhood: *work* and *keep*.



## A MAN'S WORK

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God's first calling to men directs us to *work*. It is commonly realized that men were made to be productive. Yet the idea here is not simply labor, but specifically the work of *cultivating*. We gain this insight from the context in which Adam was to work: as the cultivator of God's garden. The man was called by God to till the soil and cultivate living things so that they would grow and bear beautiful fruit.

What does a gardener do to make his garden grow? The answer is that he tends the garden. He plants seeds and prunes branches. The gardener digs and fertilizes. His labor makes living things strong, beautiful, and lush. This idea should be extended beyond Adam's local context to the relationships men are called to serve today. We are intended to "work" whatever field the Lord places us in, investing our energies, ideas, and passions to make good things grow. A biblical man, then, is one who has devoted himself to cultivating, building, and growing.

The most significant application of this first item in God's masculine mandate occurs in a man's closest relationships: as a husband and a father. Genesis 2:15 urges godly men to think of these and other relationships in terms of Adam's garden. We are to invest our labors in the hearts of our wives and children so that our hands are green with the soil of their hearts. Christian men are to take a hands-on approach to growing their faith in Christ and to provide healthy encouragement and inspiration. God calls Christian men to "work" these gardens, sacrificially serving so that there is an abundance of life and blessing in the hearts of those we love.

This biblical mandate to tend our gardens explodes the idea that a true man is the strong, silent type. To the contrary, a godly man is a cultivator and nurturer: he devotes himself to building up the hearts of his wife and children (not to mention employees and other significant people). Most of us have been blessed by a man's arm on our shoulder or a manly pat on the back, and we know how masculine encouragement is designed by God to go straight to the heart. Realizing this truth will prompt Christian men to redirect their attention to the minds and hearts of the

*“...our basic mandate as Christian men is to cultivate, build and grow (both things and people) and also to stand guard so that those under our care are kept safe...”*

people in our lives and also to shape prayerfully the words that we speak.

#### **A MAN'S KEEP**

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The second half of God's masculine mandate charges men to “keep.” Here, the meaning is to *guard* or *protect*. This word is used of soldiers, shepherds, priests, custodians, and government officials. The Lord ascribes “keeping” to himself, saying in Psalm 121:7–8: “The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore.”

This calling to *keep* rounds out the masculine mandate of the Bible. A man is not only to wield the plow, but also to bear the sword. Being God's deputy in the garden, Adam not only was to make it fruitful but also to keep it safe. Likewise, our basic mandate as Christian men is to cultivate, build and grow (both things and people) and also to stand guard so that those under our care are kept safe.

Just two words. The Masculine Mandate is simple but not, therefore, easy. What a difference it will make if Christian men will check out of the self-centered grid paraded around us in secular society and instead embrace God's

calling to work and keep — to till the soil of hearts and stand guard over God’s treasured ones. Christian men will spend our lifetimes learning what it means to serve sacrificially so that others may abound in life and to guard vigilantly so that our wives, children, communities, and church are kept safe. But what a difference such biblical manhood makes.

## THE SWORD AND THE SHOVEL

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Nehemiah 4 provides a vivid picture of the kind of men that God wants us to be. Nehemiah is famous for rebuilding Jerusalem’s wall, and it was no easy task. Not only was the work difficult, but there were enemies nearby who sought to frustrate the project. To answer this challenge, Nehemiah placed the men of Jerusalem at the worksite armed both to work and keep. To this end, he armed the city’s men with a shovel in one hand and a spear or sword in the other: “each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other” (Neh. 4:17). Here is the Bible’s vision of Christian manhood that will meet the trials of our times as well: men who work to cultivate in their families, communities, and churches, and who are armed with God’s strength to defend. God’s calling to “work” and “keep” will enable Christian men today to raise up a generation after us to serve the Lord and will keep our loved ones safe as we prayerfully stand between our families and the evil raging on every side. ✕

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# Act Like Men

In his final instructions of his first epistle to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul issues a series of five exhortations: “Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love” (1 Cor. 16:13–14). The purpose of this article is to examine the third exhortation — “act like men” — and explore whether that command tells us anything about manhood and masculinity.

## UNDERSTANDING *ANDRIZOMAI*

The phrase “act like men” (ESV) translates a single Greek word: *andrizesthe*, from the word *andrizomai*. Several English translations render the *andrizomai* as “be courageous” (CSB, NAB, NIV, NLT, NRSV, RSV) or “be brave” (GNT, NKJV), choosing not to bring out the sense of *anēr* (Greek: “man”) on which the word is built.

By contrast, the ESV and NASB translate *andrizomai* as “act like men,” while other English translations have “act like a man” (HCSB), “do manfully” (Douay-Rheims), or, most famously, “quit you like men” (Geneva Bible, KJV).

Everyone agrees that Paul uses *andrizomai* to tell the Corinthians to be brave and courageous. The question is whether the word also implies something about what it means to be a man. Curiously, the second edition of BDAG (the standard Greek lexicon of the New Testament) defines *andrizomai* as: “conduct oneself in a manly or courageous way” while the third edition defines the word as: “conduct oneself in a courageous way.” Since virtually all the same supporting examples are used in both editions, it seems the editors — perhaps due to changing cultural perceptions —

simply chose to eliminate any connection to manliness.

In recent years, suggesting that there is a “manly” aspect to *andrizomai* has become more suspect. Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner, for example, warn that “some scholars have taken the etymology of the word as evidence for a high biblical view of the male gender.”<sup>1</sup> The issue, however, is not whether *andrizomai* suggests “a high biblical view of the male gender” — a view I have not seen any scholar articulate — but whether the word says anything about the possible virtues of masculinity. Even the egalitarian Gordon Fee maintained that *andrizomai* “means to ‘play the role of a man,’ an idea that is frequent in antiquity as a call to courage in the face of danger.”<sup>2</sup> Surely, Fee is correct. The word Paul chose to use in 1 Corinthians 16:13 was a familiar word (though used only here in the New Testament) that borrowed on ancient notions of manly courage and bravery. As Anthony Thiselton puts it, “The translation of *ανδρίζεσθε* has probably become unnecessarily sensitive. In lexicographical terms the meaning clearly turns on ‘masculine’ writers stereotypically associated with *ανήρ* (gen *ανδρός*).”<sup>3</sup>

Thiselton’s conclusion — that *andrizomai* is clearly connected to a masculine sense of *anēr* — would have been uncontroversial until fairly recently. John Calvin gives the gloss “manly fortitude.”<sup>4</sup> Matthew Henry understands the exhortation to mean “Christians should be manly and firm in

defending their faith.”<sup>5</sup> In their *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (one of Spurgeon’s favorite commentaries), Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown maintain that Paul said “watch ye” because the Corinthians were slumbering, “stand” was because they were tottering, and “quit you like men” was because they were effeminate.<sup>6</sup> Chrysostom was probably thinking something similar when he argued that “watch” was a caution against deceivers, “stand” was a caution against those who plot against us, and “quit you like men” was a caution against “those who make parties and endeavor to distract.”<sup>7</sup> For Chrysostom, *andrizomai* was the manly antidote to the cowardice that comes from being led astray by ephemeral things.

## VIRTUOUS MASCULINITY

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So does Paul’s exhortation in 1 Corinthians 6:13 tell us anything about the nature of manhood and masculinity? Two cautions and then two points.

The first caution is that we should not load too much theology onto one ordinary, non-technical Greek word. Paul did not use *andrizomai* to establish a blueprint for biblical manhood or to indicate his “high biblical view of the male gender.” Paul wanted the church to stand strong, be brave, and to push back against bad ideas and bad behavior.

The second caution is that we should not think that courage is only a virtue to be associated with masculinity. Paul’s letter

<sup>1</sup> Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 855, fn 45.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 828, fn 13.

<sup>3</sup> Antony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 1336.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries, 22 Vols.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993), 20:76.

<sup>5</sup> Leslie F. Church, ed., *Commentary on the Whole Bible by Matthew Henry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 1827.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1961), 1228.

<sup>7</sup> *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 12:264.



was addressed to the saints in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2), and no doubt this included men *and* women. The history of God’s people is full of examples of courageous women — both in the Bible (e.g. Deborah, Jael, Abigail, Esther) and outside the Bible (e.g. Perpetua and Felicitas). The command *andrizesthe* applies to both sexes.

With these cautions in place, however, there is still something to learn about masculinity from 1 Corinthians 16:13.

First, it is significant that Paul felt free to borrow from his culture’s expectation that acting like a man meant bravery and strength. Paul’s use of *andrizomai* in 1 Corinthians is similar to his use of motherly and fatherly language in 1 Thessalonians 2. For Paul, motherhood is a picture of affection and care (1 Thess. 2:7–8), while fatherhood is a picture of discipline and exhortation (v. 11–12). Of course, these virtues are *not exclusive* to men and women, which is why Paul can describe himself in these terms. But the virtues are most closely *associated* with either men or women. In the same way, Paul says “act like men,” not because women should not also be brave, but because there is something particularly unmanly about shrinking back and shirking one’s duty out of fear.

Second, we should not miss the fact that “act like men” is not only a call to manly bravery (instead of effeminacy), it is a call to adult behavior (instead of immaturity). This is an important point, lest we think masculinity entails rash bravado. Paul did not want the Corinthians to be cowardly, but neither did he want them to be childish (1 Cor. 13:11). Manly fortitude is never petulant or peevish. We “act

“For Paul, motherhood is a picture of affection and care (1 Thess. 2:7–8), while fatherhood is a picture of discipline and exhortation”

like men” when we show ourselves to be strong, and when that strength is under control (Titus 2:6).

“Be strong, and let your heart take courage” (Ps. 31:24). That is a summons for all God’s people, especially for men. When Latimer told Ridley — they were both soon to be killed — that he should “play the man,” I am sure Ridley knew what he meant. And so do we. He meant: let us be men; let us be brave. For at the heart of virtuous masculinity is boldness for the sake of the truth and courage for the sake of others. ✕

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# A Biblical Eldership Is A Male Only Eldership



There are many books and articles on leadership. Too many. But few courageously address the issue of male only pastoral leadership and why it is necessary. The Bible teaches that the church's elders are to be men, yet this foundational, biblical truth is relentlessly attacked and deemed totally irrelevant by most people.

In this brief article, I will focus on Paul's instructions to his beloved church in Ephesus. Ephesus was one of the four major epicenters of early Christianity and where Paul labored in the gospel for nearly three years. What Paul writes to this believing community is Holy Scripture and essential to our theme of a male-only church eldership.

## MALE LEADERSHIP IN MARRIAGE AND THE HOME

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While in prison in Rome, Paul wrote his magisterial letter to the Ephesians. In this letter he makes this stunning and authoritative statement about husbands and wives in Christian marriage:

For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:23–27)

*“As Christ Is the Head”*

Paul’s basis for the husband’s headship (leadership) is not first-century Greco-Roman culture. Instead, it is Christ and his church. This is the most compelling argument that male headship in Christian marriage is not cultural, but of divine origin: the husband is the head of the wife (and here is the analogy), “as Christ is the head of the church.”<sup>1</sup> Certainly, Christ’s headship over the church is not a relic of an ancient cultural patriarchy.

Furthermore, Christian husbands are to love their wives “as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). One cannot love his wife as Christ loved the church and cruelly use and abuse her. Scripture speaks clearly here of loving, Christlike family leadership, not selfish narcissism. Thus the Christian husband leads, protects, and provides.

*“As the Church Submits to Christ”*

So too, the basis for the wife’s submission is not first-century Greco-Roman society. It is Christ and his church: “As the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands” (v. 24). In Christian marriage, the wife represents the church that freely and willingly submits to Christ’s headship; the husband represents Christ, the self-giving, loving head of the church.

Thus headship-submission in the marriage relationship is not culturally conditioned. On the contrary, “it is part of the essence of marriage.”<sup>2</sup>

## THE HOME SUPPORTS THE CHURCH AND THE CHURCH SUPPORTS THE HOME

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Since the family is the fundamental social unit and the man is the established family leader, we should expect that men would also be the leaders of the extended church family, “the household of God” (1 Tim. 3:15). The local church family should be a

<sup>1</sup> Arguments to the contrary are made by egalitarians like Beth Allison Barr, who alleges, “Echoes of human patriarchy parade throughout the New Testament—from the exclusivity of male Jews to the harsh adultery laws applied to women and even to the writings of Paul. The early church was trying to make sense of its place in both a Jewish and Roman world, and much of those worlds bled through into the church’s story.” *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021), 35. Notice the not-so-subtle suggestion that the apostle Paul himself “parades the patriarchy.”

<sup>2</sup> George Knight III, “Husbands and Wives as Analogues of Christ and the Church: Ephesians 5:21–33 and Colossians 3:18–19,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006) 176, emphasis original.

model of godly male headship from which individual families can learn how to follow God's design for the family. Stephen B. Clark succinctly states the principle of male headship in the home and in the church:

If the men are supposed to be the heads of the family, they must also be the heads of the [church] community. The [church] community must be structured in a way that supports the pattern of the family, and the family must be structured in a way that supports the pattern of the [church] community.<sup>3</sup>

To this statement, Paul would say: "Amen."

### **MALE LEADERSHIP IN THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD**

If Ephesians 5 is the crowning passage on Christian marriage, then 1 Timothy 2 is the crowning passage for male-only leadership in the local church family. The letter of 1 Timothy instructs Timothy and the church on "how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). Essential to proper behavior in the household of God are the moral and spiritual qualifications for its leaders (1 Tim. 3:1-7). All these qualifications assume the elder is a man.

When we look at the verses immediately preceding the elders' qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1-13, we see that Paul restricted women from being pastoral elders:

I desire . . . likewise also that

women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel . . . [and] with what is proper for women who profess godliness — with good works. . . . I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor (1 Tim. 2:8-10, 12-14).

First Timothy 2:8-13 is part of the larger context beginning in 2:1 and ending in 3:16. The apostle's instructions regarding Christian men and women in the gathered assembly (vv. 8-12) are intimately connected to, and govern his instructions for, the elders and deacons of 1 Timothy 3:1-13. All these instructions are part of God's arrangement for men and women, leaders, and followers in "the household of God" (1 Tim. 3:15).

Following Paul's instructions prohibiting women from teaching and leading men in the gathered assembly, Paul describes the qualifications for those who oversee the local church (1 Tim. 3:1-7). These qualifications assume a male subject. The overseer is to be "the husband of one wife" and one who manages "his own household well" (1 Tim. 3:2, 4). Since 1 Timothy 5:17 states that elders lead and teach the church, and since women are not to lead and teach the church, it follows that women cannot be elders/overseers.

### *An Apostolic Command*

Paul knew that this issue needed to be stated with authority and clarity, so he

<sup>3</sup>Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1980), 630.



declared in unambiguous language: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet” (1 Tim. 2:12). Could he have stated this any more simply and clearly? In the local church community, women are not to teach or take authority over the men in the gathered church. This is the authoritative, binding word of the Apostle Paul.

The Greek verb for “to exercise authority” (*αὐθεντέω* [*authentēō*]) means “to have authority over” or “to exercise authority.” It does not mean “to usurp authority” or “to instigate violence” or “to misuse authority,” which egalitarians mistakenly assert.<sup>4</sup>

The book *Women in the Church*, edited by Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, provides a comprehensive look at 1 Timothy 2:9–15.<sup>5</sup> This book works through all the challenging interpretive

issues of 1 Timothy 2, including a thorough and careful study of the Greek word *authentēō*, “to exercise authority.” Readers with lingering questions about the meaning and application of 1 Timothy 2:9–15 are strongly encouraged to read this important work.<sup>6</sup>

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#### **THE ORIGINAL CREATION ORDER DESIGNED BY GOD**

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Paul’s restriction on women certainly elicited criticism then, just as it does today. So, as in nearly all other references to distinct male-female roles, Paul immediately supports his instruction with Scripture: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” (1 Tim. 2:13–14). Paul anchors his instruction firmly in the Genesis account. Like Jesus, Paul takes his readers back to creation, back to Genesis, back to the first man and woman (Matt. 19:3–9).

<sup>4</sup> See Cynthia Long Westfall, “The Meaning of *αὐθεντέω* in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism*, 10 (2014): 138–73.

<sup>5</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, eds., *Women in the Church: An Interpretation and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9–15*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> See Al Wolter’s, “The Meaning of *Αὐθεντέω*” in *Women in the Church: An Interpretation and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9–15*, 3rd ed., ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 65–116.

Paul does not appeal to local culture, the lack of women's education, or the supposed problems of heretical female teachers. He simply appeals to God's original, timeless creation design and mandate (Gen. 1:27–28).

Do not miss that Paul uses the strongest conceivable arguments to prove headship/submission: (1) the timeless creation laws of Genesis (1 Tim. 2:13–14; 1 Cor. 11:7–12); (2) the universal practice of the churches (1 Cor. 11:16; 14:36–38); (3) Christ's mission (1 Cor. 11:3); (4) the command of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 14:37); and (5) the Christ-church relationship (Eph. 5:23–27). Thus, the New Testament intends these restrictions to be permanent and universally binding on all believers and all churches.

#### **HARMONY WITH OTHER SCRIPTURAL TEXTS**

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Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 2 is not an isolated, *ad hoc* teaching. It conforms

precisely with his other instructions on the distinctive roles of men and women in the home and church (see 1 Cor. 11:2–16, 14:33–38; Eph. 5:22–33; Col. 3:18–19; Titus 2:4–5; see also 1 Pet. 3:1–7). It also conforms to the entire, overall example and teaching of the Bible. This is why secular feminists find the Bible hopelessly out of date and detrimental to all women. From their perspective, there is no chance of rescuing the Bible from itself by cleverly reinterpreting what it so clearly says about the role distinctions between women and men to agree with secular ideology. They simply reject the Bible as patriarchal and demeaning to women.

#### **GIFTED WOMEN**

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The principle of male headship does not diminish the significance and necessity of a woman's active involvement in the Lord's work. Our passage does not imply that women have no ability to teach or



lead. We all know that women as well as men have spiritual gifts; they can be excellent teachers and have leadership and administrative abilities. A Christian woman may be a teacher, medical doctor, an evangelist, or owner of a business (like Lydia, Acts 16:14).

First-century Christian women played an indispensable role in the Lord's work. Some of Paul's co-laborers in the gospel were women (Rom. 16:1-15; Phil. 4:2-3). Yet their active role in advancing the gospel and caring for the Lord's people was accomplished in ways that did not violate male leadership in the home and church. When the local church gathers, men are to take the lead in teaching and governing the church family. In this way, the local church displays God's wise design for men and women in the home and "the household of God."

To survive the secular tsunami flooding

over our churches, and especially our young people, we need strong Christian men and women of faith who believe the Bible to be the authoritative Word of God, and courage to teach and defend God's perfect design for men and women in the home and church. ✕

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# Esteeming Fatherhood





Jesus Christ uses intimate language to communicate with his Father. In his grace, he shares that intimacy with us, and invites us to call him our Father. When Christ taught his apostles the Lord's Prayer, he taught all Christians how to pray and relate to God the Father.

God is the ultimate patriarch. He is the head of the heavenly family — the angels in heaven worship and glorify him ceaselessly. He is also Father of the earthly family — he created man in his image and calls us his sons and daughters in redemption. By becoming Christians, born again through baptism in water and the Holy Spirit, through our faith in him, we become children of God. He adopts us as his own.

As our great Father, God protects and provides for his children. Just as our biological father provides for us by putting food on the table to sustain our bodies, God provides for us through the Eucharist, sustaining our souls. It could be said we have a temporal father to take care of our physical needs, and a spiritual Father to look after our spiritual wellbeing. But God is greater than that; he has a hand in both. Through his omnipotence, God is with us in everything, even our suffering. Jesus Christ — fully man and fully God — died on the cross for us. He suffered for our sake. Therefore, we can be reminded that when we are suffering, Christ is with us in our suffering. It is a sign of how much our Father loves us. God loves us so much, that he gave us his only begotten son.

All of this goes to show how deeply benevolent fatherhood is ingrained within

the fabric of creation. Remove fatherhood, and things come undone.

## THE GOODS OF FATHERHOOD

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This is why the enemy is focused on defeating “The Patriarchy.” The only time we hear that word these days is in a derogatory fashion, “down with The Patriarchy.” The enemy lies through omission and a twisting of the truth, and therefore will paint this as a good thing — usually with lines of equity: “There are more men in senior positions, therefore the natural conclusion is that men are oppressing women, destroy The Patriarchy!” Or, “The gender pay gap is a form of oppression, smash The Patriarchy!” We know these to be fabrications. They are untrue for many reasons. The statistics show that there is no gender pay gap — men and women in the same role get paid the same amount; that is the law. One of the reasons there are more men in leadership positions than women is because women take time off to have babies — an incredibly good thing. Motherhood is the most important vocation in the world, after all. But the stats are manipulated by some because they want to paint women as victims at the hand of men.

The enemy's response would be that men and women should be equal in everything. That is not possible. Men and women are not equal, in that we are not the same. We are equal in the eyes of God, in terms of our dignity and our worth, but in lots of other ways we are different. Men are physically stronger, faster, and more powerful. Women are more nurturing, more emotionally intelligent, and fairer

*“This is an issue with male responsibility. It is time for boys to become men, and men to become fathers.”*

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than men. This isn't a bad thing. But the enemy would say a woman is only successful if she acts in the place of a man, if she competes with men in men's fields, if there are just as many female leaders as men. This is a falsehood. Women are successful when they have contributed to God's kingdom in the ways that only a woman can — and that includes, but is not exclusive to, bearing children. Just as men are successful when they contribute to God's kingdom in the ways that only a man can — and that usually includes providing for and protecting his wife and his offspring.

Men are ten times more likely to die at work than women. And rightly so. We would expect men to do the more dangerous jobs. Even the feminists aren't arguing for more women to be in the sewers, on the front lines, or down the mines. That is the role of fathers, whether fathers of biological children or father figures in the community. All men are called to a father-like role in society. Not everyone is blessed with children of

their own, but all men are called to act responsibly, with a kindly strength, to be gentlemanly toward and provide firm love, guidance, and protection toward children. In times gone by, we'd call it chivalry — to operate with a religious, moral, and social code.

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#### **THE ILLS OF FATHERLESSNESS**

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Fatherlessness is rampant in our society. The enemy has been gaining ground in this area for decades now. We know that when a family breaks down, the children are twice as likely to end up failing in school, twice as likely to end up getting in trouble with the police, and more than twice as likely to end up homeless on the streets.<sup>1</sup>

Pair these statistics with the fact that marriages are down to just over 200,000 a year in the United Kingdom, and abortions are up to over 200,000. We are ending as many families as we are starting. This is an issue with male responsibility. It is time for boys to become men, and men

<sup>1</sup> "Why Family Matters: Comprehensive Analysis of the Consequences of Family Breakdown," The Centre for Social Justice. <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/why-family-matters-comprehensive-analysis-of-the-consequences-of-family-breakdown>.

to become fathers. If a woman is put in a position where she sees abortion as her only option — which it never is — then somewhere along the way she has been let down by a man. That man should have stepped up and become the leader of the family. Sadly, that’s not always possible, which is why sometimes abortion is seen as a convenient contraceptive for worldly women. This is wrong. But a man should not be fornicating with a woman who is not his wife in the first place. And if a woman is getting an abortion within a marriage, her husband has failed in his role. The leader of the family is the father. Therefore, the buck stops with him.

We need to restore the goodness and primacy of fatherhood, return to chivalry, and encourage boys to become men and men to become fathers. We need to teach our young men to take responsibility: that the conjugal act is to be performed within the bounds of marriage, and it is for the greater glory of God, to be open to be blessed by him with children, for his worship and for the good of the community.

It is time we brought God back into the picture, particularly when it comes to

fatherhood. For so long the enemy has been convincing young men that sex is an act of personal pleasure, and that lustful desire is to be met whenever one feels the urge, either through fornication, adultery, sodomy, or pornography. We live in a world where sin is encouraged. Our role as Christians is to lead people back onto the straight and narrow. And it is, indeed, a narrow path, “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matt. 7:13–14). But this is the path back to our Father. ✕

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# Male Headship or Servant Leadership?

In this essay, I take aim at a false antithesis pertaining to God's purposes and calling for men. For true masculinity to be pursued and attained, we must not fall prey to a false antithesis, which wrongly posits an either/or in place of a both/and. As D.A. Carson asks and answers:

So which shall we choose? Experience or truth? The left wing of the airplane, or the right? Love or integrity? Study or service? Evangelism or discipleship? The front wheels of a car, or the rear? Subjective knowledge or objective knowledge? Faith or

obedience? Damn all false antithesis to hell, for they generate false gods, they perpetuate idols, they twist and distort our souls, they launch the church into violent pendulum swings whose oscillations succeed only in dividing brothers and sisters in Christ!

We could easily and legitimately add the following questions to Carson's fine list: Which shall real men choose? Courage or gentleness?<sup>2</sup> Nature or cultural customs (stereotypes)?<sup>3</sup> Male headship or servant leadership? It is this last false antithesis I take on in this essay. Of course, the correct

<sup>1</sup>D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 234.

<sup>2</sup>For an excellent treatment of this false antithesis, see Andy Naselli's essay: "Are you a Gentle Man?" *American Reformed*, last modified August 7, 2023, <https://americanreformer.org/2023/08/are-you-a-gentle-man/>.

<sup>3</sup>For more on this false antithesis, see Joe Rigney's essay: "What Makes a Man — or a Woman?: Lost Voices on a Vital Question," *Desiring God*, last modified September 9, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-makes-a-man-or-a-woman>. Also, see Steven Wedgworth, "Good and Proper: Paul's Use of Nature, Custom, and Decorum in Pastoral Theology," *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 2.2 (Fall 2020): 88–97. <https://cbmw.org/2020/11/20/good-and-proper-pauls-use-of-nature-custom-and-decorum-in-pastoral-theology/>.

# Yes.

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answer for each of these questions is: *yes*. As fallen human beings, we are liable to label masculine virtues as vices or to label male vices as virtuous. And as Carson does well to draw out, the damnable lie at the heart of such false antitheses breeds violent pendulum swings that divide the body of Christ. It seems to me that in the broader evangelical world, the common cycle relating to gender and sexuality (and more specifically for this essay, masculinity) debates, is a swing toward an egalitarian or narrow complementarian view on one side of the false antithesis, which is met by an equal and opposite overcorrection by the biblical patriarchy movement,<sup>4</sup> leaving evangelicals with

whiplash and blame toward the other side for the injury.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, the “camps” of egalitarianism, narrow complementarianism, broad complementarianism, and biblical patriarchy provide a conceptual framework through which I will think through the false antithesis of male headship and servant leadership. I will begin by unpacking the historical movement from egalitarianism to complementarianism to biblical patriarchy in evangelical circles, arguing that broad complementarianism is closer to biblical patriarchy than it is egalitarianism or narrow complementarianism. I will then make the case as to why I find broad complementarianism the more viable label

<sup>4</sup>The biblical patriarchy movement is headlined by men like Doug Wilson, Michael Foster, and Zachary Garris is often (though not always) connected to a strong continuity view of the Old and New Testaments, such that proponents are often postmillennial and/or theonomic.

<sup>5</sup>While I find that egalitarians/narrow complementarians tend to reject/undermine the principle of male headship, the biblical patriarchy movement tends to undermine the principle of servant leadership in their reaction to egalitarianism/narrow complementarianism.

for conservative evangelicals to rally around in the last section of this essay.

Before I interact with other positions, let me put my cards on the table. I am convinced the root error in many (if not all) reductionistic presentations of masculinity is that the good, true, and beautiful are treated like a buffet rather than a full course meal. Manhood is indeed good, true, and beautiful, and therefore ought to be revered and celebrated as a crucial component in God's good design for human flourishing. When this is not the case, men will plague society as domineering despots or apathetic abdicators. The question is not *whether* men will lead, but *how*? True to my complementarian leanings, I contend that rather than *compete* with one another, male headship and servant leadership *complement* one another, such that apart from *both*, true masculinity cannot be attained in theory or practice.

I am a broad complementarian, which means that I understand there to be a covenantal headship given to men in both the church and home. Furthermore, since grace restores nature, and in no way abrogates it or cuts against the grain of God's design, the call for men to lead has

necessary implications beyond the church and home. In other words, male headship in the church and home is a reflection of created order being restored, therefore it would be unnatural for egalitarian principles to ground the broader society. God's gracious covenantal arrangements correspond with nature, meaning they are not arbitrary but fitting with who he has made men to be and what he calls them to do. This is not to suggest that all men are the head of all women, as the covenantal headship of men over women is limited to the husband and wife relationship, and the church under its male pastors/elders. What this means is that natural law or created order as it relates to the relationship between men and women in society does not speak with the applicational specificity that Scripture does regarding male headship in the church and home.<sup>6</sup> So, prudential reasoning and epistemic humility are required as to how we ought to apply the principle of male headship beyond the church and home. But let me be very clear, we *must* affirm and honor nature/created order in our reasoning *and* in our application via cultural customs for human flourishing to occur.<sup>7</sup> With my cards now on the table, it is time to engage others.

<sup>6</sup>One simple way I seek to communicate this reality is that while I use the language of "male headship" as it pertains to a husband's relationship to his wife, or even how the Bible speaks of men leading in the church as a reflection of nature for God's household, I use the language of "male leadership" when referencing the prudential application honoring nature/created order outside of the church and home, since we are then moving outside of the category of federal or representative categories. What I am getting at here is captured well by John Piper when he laments, "We have developed a theology and a cultural bias that continually communicates to men: You bear no different responsibility for women than they bear for you. Or to put it differently, we have created a Bible-contradicting, nature-denying myth that men should feel no different responsibility to protect women than women feel to protect men. Many have put their hope in the myth that the summons to generic human virtue, with no attention to the peculiar virtues required of manhood and womanhood, would be sufficient to create a beautiful society of mutual respect. It isn't working." "Do Men Owe Women a Special Kind of Care?" *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 4.1 (Spring 2022): 80–87. Positively, we must affirm that grace restores what sin seeks to destroy, and one takeaway of this reality is that men ought to joyfully take upon ourselves the burden of ensuring the protection of women, as this is rooted in the very nature of manhood.

<sup>7</sup>Joe Rigney's captures what I seek to get at here well when he argues, "Special revelation has linguistic priority over general revelation...In saying that Scripture has a linguistic priority, we are not saying that nature is obscure or unclear...So general revelation includes both the fixed natural order as well as human minds to discern and express the import and implications of that order. But that process takes time and effort and maturity, and therefore, Scripture, by giving us God's revelation in human language, is more direct, even if both Scripture and nature are clear." "With One Voice: Scripture and Nature for Ethics and Discipleship." *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 2.1 (Spring 2019): 26–37.

## EGALITARIANISM, COMPLEMENTARIANISM, AND PATRIARCHY

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Increasingly, egalitarians are charging complementarians with being patriarchal, and the biblical patriarchy movement is charging complementarianism with being functional egalitarians. This is due in part, I believe, to the reality that complementarianism has situated itself “between” egalitarianism and patriarchalism, not because we complementarians are attempting to be the perfect mean or “third way,” but because we find tendencies in these other movements to denigrate or reject good aspects of masculinity. This may be best evidenced by how egalitarians reject male headship; they and some narrow complementarians then confuse servant leadership for male servitude, and in response the biblical patriarchy crowd scoffs at servant leadership and doubles down on male headship.<sup>8</sup> I find there to be evidence of the false antithesis being wrongly affirmed in each of these reflexes. I by no means think that real and perceived abuses of male headship invalidates it as a principle. I also do not cede servant leadership to those who abuse it.<sup>9</sup> Glad affirmation and promotion of all that God calls men to is the aim. Using two good doctrines/principles as a proxy war is not the way forward.

Egalitarians see male headship as a product of sin, not as a good component of God’s created order. Increasingly, to reject male headship, egalitarians are forced to not only denigrate the clarity of the created order,<sup>10</sup> but even more brazenly, Scripture too, by speaking of God’s Word as though it is an irreducibly cultural artifact.<sup>11</sup> In so doing, egalitarians undermine the reality that the Bible’s calling for men to lead in the home, church, and society is a reflection of nature. In other words, male headship cannot be summarily dismissed as merely an arbitrary and now-outmoded social construct of a bygone era. To reject male headship as a principle is akin to rejecting the institution of marriage on the false grounds that it is a mere social construct, because both are revealed in Scripture to be pre-fall/sin realities, both of which are ordained by God and called “good.” Mature Christians, whose powers of discernment are trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil, will recognize the feminist-egalitarian spirit of the age we live in as evil, and not partner with the works of darkness (Heb. 5:14; Eph. 5:6–12).

On the other hand, there is a growing trend to advocate for “biblical patriarchy” or “dominionism” in the Reformed sector of the evangelical world. Now, there is more agreement between a broad

<sup>8</sup> For an example of a patriarchy/dominionist type doubling down on male headship over and against the servant leadership model, see Bnonn Tennant’s argument in this essay: “Servant leadership transforms leadership into subservience,” *It’s Good to Be a Man*, last modified May 9, 2019, <https://itsgoodtobeaman.com/servant-leadership-transforms-leadership-into-subservience/>. See also Michael Foster and Bnonn Tennant, “The Compromise in Complementarianism,” *Discipleship and Dominion*, last modified November 26, 2019, <https://discipleshipanddominion.substack.com/p/complementarianism-presupposes-androgynism>.

<sup>9</sup> The fundamental distinction between a narrow complementarian and a broad complementarian is that the latter understands male headship to be natural, or rooted in created order, such that male headship has application not merely (or narrowly) in the church and home, but also (broadly) in society too. For more on the distinctions between the two, and why Broad Complementarianism is the way forward, see Kevin DeYoung’s “The Beauty of Broad Complementarianism,” *Christ Over All*, last modified March 29, 2023 (original talk given on April 2, 2019), <https://christoverall.com/article/concise/the-beauty-of-biblically-broad-complementarianism/>.

<sup>10</sup> For an excellent argument on the intelligibility and normativity of male headship in both nature and Scripture, see Joe Rigney’s essay, “Indicatives, Imperatives, and Applications: Reflections on Natural, Biblical, and Cultural Complementarianism,” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 4.1 (Spring 2022): 28–36.

<sup>11</sup> DeYoung, “Death to the Patriarchy?”



complementarian such as myself and the biblical patriarchy movement than with egalitarianism and even narrow complementarians. As Kevin DeYoung rightly argues, “The biblical vision of complementarity cannot be true without something like patriarchy also being true.”<sup>12</sup> What he means by this is that the reality of male headship in Scripture is inherent to complementarianism. Thus, if there were a scale with egalitarianism labeled as a 1, and biblical patriarchy a 5, broad complementarianism would not be a 3 right in the middle (a narrow complementarian would be a 2–3), but a 4, closer to patriarchy than to egalitarianism. The suitability of men and women for one another as affirmed in creation and redemption is hierarchical pertaining to their roles and calling. To not affirm this, DeYoung suggests, is to choose anarchy over God’s good design.<sup>13</sup> He is correct. As Herman Bavinck rightly explains, “Authority and obedience, independence and subordination, equality and inequality, correspondence and variation, unity of nature and diversity of gifts and callings—all these have been present in the family from the very beginning, and in no sense came into existence as a result of sin.”<sup>14</sup> This logic is grounded in a right reading of Genesis 1–2 and is affirmed in Paul’s clear teaching in places like 1 Timothy 2:12–15 and 1 Corinthians 11:7–12.

In fact, this is why I think egalitarian critiques of complementarianism (not to mention the increasing number of narrow complementarian critiques of broad complementarianism), tend to conflate

<sup>12</sup> Kevin DeYoung, “Death to the Patriarchy? Complementarity and the Scandal of ‘Father Rule,’” *Desiring God*, July 19, 2022, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/death-to-the-patriarchy>.

<sup>13</sup> DeYoung, “Death to the Patriarchy?”

<sup>14</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Christian’s Library Press, 2012), 115.



patriarchy with broad complementarianism.<sup>15</sup> These critiques are both *right* and *wrong* in their conflation. Right, because broad complementarianism readily affirms the fatherhood of our Father in heaven. As Kyle Claunch explains regarding Ephesians 3:14, “Paul is stating here that fatherhood in creation (‘in heaven and earth’) derives its name from God the Father, to whom Paul and all faithful Christians bow the knee.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, the first person of the Trinity is *properly* referred to as Father and the covenantal headship of the man over his household *analogically* reflects this glory. To seek to “dismantle the patriarchy” as someone like Beth Allison Barr or Amy Peeler do,<sup>17</sup> undermines an orthodox understanding of the Trinity and kicks against the goads of God’s design for men and women in creation.<sup>18</sup>

Where Barr and others who wrongly equate complementarianism and patriarchy are mistaken, though, is that complementarians tend not to take up the label of patriarchy as it pertains to God’s calling for men

and women due to the negative historical connections of pagan patriarchy, the confidence with which patriarchy extends male headship beyond the church and home without clear scriptural warrant, *and* because we sense in biblical patriarchy a temptation to overcorrect against the feminist/egalitarian impulses of our day. As DeYoung explains, “There is nothing to be gained by Christians reclaiming the term *patriarchy* in itself. In fact, *reclaim* is not even the right word, because I’m not sure Christians have *ever* argued for something called ‘patriarchy.’”<sup>19</sup> In other words, the biblical patriarchy movement runs the risk of being a modern overcorrection in response to feminism and narrow complementarianism. Just because the word “patriarch” is used in Scripture as a descriptor, does not mean it is the ideal term to capture God’s calling for men and women in the church, home, and society, or that it entails *the* patriarchy (cf. Josh. 14:1; Rom. 9:5; Heb. 7:4).<sup>20</sup> While it is irrefutable that Scripture describes heads of households

<sup>15</sup> For more on this increasing egalitarian and narrow complementarian conflation, see my essay “Endless Repackagings of Egalitarianism: Four Important Book Reviews,” *Christ Over All*, last modified March 27, 2023, <https://christovertime.com/article/concise/endless-repackagings-of-egalitarianism-four-important-book-reviews/>.

<sup>16</sup> Kyle Claunch, “On the Improper Use of Proper Speech: A Response to Ronald W. Pierce and Erin M. Heim, ‘Biblical Images of God as Mother and Spiritual Formation,’” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 5.1 (Spring 2023): 69–77, <https://cbmw.org/2023/06/22/on-the-improper-use-of-proper-speech-a-response-to-ronald-w-pierce-and-erin-m-heim-biblical-images-of-god-as-mother-and-spiritual-formation/>. For further development of the Fatherhood of God, see Claunch’s extended treatment of this very topic in this edition of *Eikon*: “Theological Language and the Fatherhood of God: An Exegetical and Dogmatic Account.”

<sup>17</sup> See Denny Burk’s review of Peeler’s work in his review essay, “Should We Call God Mother?” in this edition of *Eikon*.

<sup>18</sup> The irony is that while egalitarians are quick to point out that some complementarians have held to ERAS and are thus outside of orthodoxy, the combined forces of Stephen Wellum’s argument in his essay “Does Complementarianism Depend on ERAS?: A Response to Kevin Giles, ‘The Trinity Argument for Women’s Subordination,’” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 5.1 (Spring 2023): 60–67 and Claunch’s “On the Improper Use of Proper Speech” turn such arguments on their head. A complementarian like myself, in agreement with Wellum and Claunch, can readily affirm classical theism and christology, and see male headship as a reflection of the fatherhood of God over creation, and Christ’s human nature as the connection point for headship and submission, not the eternal relations of the Father and Son. As Wellum explains, When Scripture does unpack the relation between husbands and wives as analogous to Christ and the church, and how God as the head of the incarnate Son (1 Cor. 11:3) is analogous to human relations, it is not in terms of the eternal relations among the persons, but more in terms of the incarnation and the divine economy. The main warrant for complementarianism, however, is Scripture itself, starting in creation and culminating in the new creation.” “Does Complementarianism Depend on ERAS?” 65. On the other hand, the preoccupation Peeler and others have with egalitarianism reverses the logical flow of what is proper of God and what is analogical, which leads to the following unbiblical and unorthodox conclusion: “In full alignment with the biblical text, God may be called upon metaphorically as Father just as God may be addressed metaphorically as Mother.” *Women and the Gender of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 102.

<sup>19</sup> DeYoung, “Death to the Patriarchy?”

<sup>20</sup> DeYoung puts it well, “It’s not a term you’ll find in Christian confessional statements from the past. It’s not a term you’ll find employed frequently (or at all) in the tradition of the church as it defends biblical views of the family, the church, and society. As a conservative, Reformed, evangelical Christian, I applaud the vision of ‘equality with beneficial differences’ and stand resolutely opposed to all forms of domination, exploitation, and oppression.” “Death to the Patriarchy?”

as patriarchy, *patriarchy* is a loaded term popularized by Kate Millet in her screed against what she labels “patriarchy.” In *Sexual Politics* she defines “the patriarchy” as male political dominance and the institutional exploitation of women.<sup>21</sup> Prior to second wave feminists weaponizing the term patriarchy as a label for misogyny and oppression, one is hard pressed to find any evangelical using the term positively to capture God’s design for men and women in the church, home, and society before Russell Moore in 2006.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, “biblical patriarchy” is a new movement intentionally taking up a byword and wearing it like a badge in reaction to the feminist spirit of the age.

#### **WHAT IS IN A NAME? BROAD COMPLEMENTARIANISM AND BIBLICAL PATRIARCHY**

So, both complementarianism and biblical patriarchy are recent conservative evangelical movements that have formed in the midst of egalitarianism making inroads in the church. If it is indeed the case that broad complementarians are closer to biblical patriarchy than egalitarianism and narrow complementarianism, to the point where we are often considered to be a part of the patriarchy by those to our left, should we just eschew the label and join team patriarchy? I think not. I am convinced there is much tread left on the tires of complementarianism for the road ahead. Broad complementarians find a pre-fall biblical word (such as complementary/suitable from Genesis 2:18) to be a better term in *principle* for

speaking of manhood and womanhood. Having a broader umbrella term under which we can situate the fullness of God’s purposes and calling for men to lead and serve in the church, home, and society is preferable. Moreover, when John Piper and Wayne Grudem coined the term *complementarianism* in 1987, it was in large part so that conservative Christians could set the terms of the discussion, and not be backed into affirming a label too monolithic and/or laden with cultural baggage — like the term patriarchy.

However, the biblical patriarchy movement is not wrong in its judgment that some expressions of complementarianism have a fly in the ointment. Sadly, even a biblical word or concept can be abused. This sentiment is expressed well by Doug Wilson when he contends, “The emphasis placed on servant leadership in recent decades has produced a soft complementarianism, one which adopts egalitarian assumptions for most of human existence, but which tolerates a modified pretend hierarchy in the two places where our trained exegetes have not yet hammered out a plausible workaround for us.”<sup>23</sup> To put a label on it, the sense I get is that those voicing frustration with the principle of servant leadership are reacting to a narrow complementarianism in the church and home, which is functionally egalitarianism in camouflage. Wilson and others who advocate for patriarchy are rightly, in my estimation, picking up on the fact that by denying the reality of male leadership *in toto* (as egalitarians do) or in broader society (as narrow

<sup>21</sup> See Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Russell Moore, “After Patriarchy, What? Why Egalitarians are Winning the Gender Debate,” *JETS*, 49/3 (September 2006): 569–76, [https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/49/49-3/JETS\\_49-3\\_569-576\\_Moore.pdf](https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/49/49-3/JETS_49-3_569-576_Moore.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Doug Wilson, “The Great Servant Leadership Mistake,” *Blog & Mablog*, September 3, 2018, “<https://dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/the-great-servant-leadership-mistake.html>”.

# “Jesus is quick to distinguish between servant leadership and despotic lordship.”

complementarians do in denying the fittingness of male leadership beyond the church and home), many evangelicals are standing on thin ice and have effectively rendered male leadership little (or no) more than a product of Bible verses.<sup>24</sup> Thus, “servant leadership” becomes an attractive workaround for those wishing to avoid the scandal that male leadership is a natural good that is baked into the created order and therefore *rightly* permeates all aspects of human society.

Such cases are indeed misguided at best, and shameful at worst, but the *abuse* of a principle does not necessarily invalidate the *use* of said principle, especially when that principle is clearly promoted

in Scripture — as servant leadership is.<sup>25</sup> The church’s head, the Lord Jesus Christ, in his earthly ministry exemplified servant leadership (Mark 10:35–45; John 13:1–17), and any man who rules well will be marked by a propensity to serve those under his charge like Christ.<sup>26</sup> In reacting to the misapplication of servant leadership, biblical patriarchy proponents must be careful not to whip the pendulum towards men in authority “lording over” others (Mark 10:42). Jesus is quick to distinguish between servant leadership and despotic lordship. This is why I use the false antithesis of male headship and servant leadership from the outset of this essay, because it aids in getting behind the labels to the ideas and principles at play.

<sup>24</sup> Narrow complementarians may object to being equated with egalitarianism as it relates to their application of servant leadership. However, both hermeneutically and functionally, I find narrow complementarianism to be a way station for egalitarianism. As Denny Burk argues, “The narrow complementarian position seems inherently unstable and tilted toward an egalitarian framing of nature. It adopts some of the same exegetical conclusions of egalitarians. It minimizes differences in design that ground the biblical prohibitions on women teaching and exercising authority over men. Indeed, it renders the prohibitions arbitrary and without foundation in nature, for women and men can function interchangeably in ministry. The long-term prospects for this position are not encouraging.” “How To Turn Complementarians into Egalitarians,” *Denny Burk*, last modified May 18, 2021, <https://www.dennyburk.com/how-to-turn-complementarians-into-egalitarians/>.

<sup>25</sup> Some advocating for biblical patriarchy readily admit this point. For example, Doug Wilson argues that “we must start by acknowledging that the mistake was not manufactured out of whole cloth. There is such a thing as a biblical servant leadership... There is such a thing as genuine servant leadership, but for it to be genuine, the servant part has to be real and the leadership (lordship) part has to be equally real.” “The Great Servant Leadership Mistake.”

<sup>26</sup> Aaron Renn recently wrote a longform critique of servant leadership as defined by some leading complementarians. While I find that he paints with too broad a brush, as it is not representative of all complementarians, Renn does make the insightful point that when it comes to servant leadership, we have to be careful to not fall into another false antithesis, in which we make the concept of the man in authority nourishing/pleasing himself out to be at odds with serving the interests of those under his charge. I find myself largely in agreement with his assessment of how many evangelicals speak of servant leadership as male servitude in which authority is replaced by service. I am convinced the uneasiness with which many evangelicals speak of male authority is due to how much our sensibilities are shaped by our culture, which leads to undermining authority via service in an unbiblical manner. I am grateful Renn does affirm the reality that servant leadership is a self-evidently good concept. We must be careful though, in critiquing the abuses of the principle, to not poison the well against the principle itself. See Aaron M. Renn, “Newsletter #81: The Problem With Servant Leadership: Evangelicals promote a vision of masculinity so bleak, no wonder men don’t want to sign up for it,” *Aaron Renn*, October 16, 2023, <https://www.aaronrenn.com/p/servant-leadership>.

My personal read on what those like Wilson, Zachary Garris, Michael Foster, and others who represent the “biblical patriarchy,” “masculine Christianity,” or “dominionist” movement(s) are calling men to be and do is not that far off from what I am advocating.<sup>26</sup> So, I do not want to exaggerate the differences here between the biblical patriarchy crowd and what I as a broad complementarian affirm. But I want to be clear and careful not to deny or denigrate the principle of servant leadership in reaction to perceived and real misapplication of this doctrine by other evangelicals. In fact, I largely agree with Andy Naselli’s conclusion: “I think both labels are fitting. *Complementarianism* emphasizes that God designed men and women to complement each other; they are not interchangeable. *Patriarchy* emphasizes that God designed fathers to rule; God designed both complementarity and hierarchy. But *what matters most is not the label but what we mean by it.*”<sup>28</sup>

That being said, I do find that what emerging advocates for biblical patriarchy tend to *mean* in taking up the label is to distance themselves

from complementarianism and even servant leadership, such that servant leadership is mocked as the wimpy complementarian compromise,<sup>29</sup> and the response is to affirm “father rule” over complementarity. Even worse, some in this movement make blanket and at times baseless charges against complementarianism, alleging that we reject nature and the created order,<sup>30</sup> or that our movement is grounded in Marxism, etc.<sup>31</sup> These emerging voices in the biblical patriarchy movement are violently swinging the pendulum to the harm and division of the body of Christ.<sup>32</sup> And to be clear, so as to avoid the charge that I am doing the same in return, it is not *patriarchy* as a principle I reject, nor do I think these outrageous charges negate the good questions and challenges the biblical patriarchy movement raises. I often resonate with the concerns expressed by those in the patriarchy camp. Rather, because patriarchy is *not* a term used by Christians throughout history in defining gender roles, and due to its inherent limitations (“father rule” is a rather monolithic term), I find it prudential to speak of “equality

<sup>27</sup> To this list, I would add Rosaria Butterfield, who in her recent book *Five Lies of our Anti-Christian Age* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2023), promotes “biblical patriarchy” as one antidote to the feminist age we find ourselves in. She writes, “Biblical patriarchy protects women by giving a wife a godly man as ‘head’ to love and protect her; a daughter, a godly father; and a single woman, a church to protect her,” *Five Lies of our Anti-Christian Age*, 188.

<sup>28</sup> Andy Naselli, “A Review of Rosaria Butterfield’s *Five Lies of Our Anti-Christian Age*,” *American Reformer*, September 1, 2023, <https://americanreformer.org/2023/09/dont-believe-cultures-lies-about-men-and-women/>.

<sup>29</sup> For an extended diatribe against the complementarian compromise regarding servant leadership, see Rich Lusk’s “The Danger of Servant-Leadership,” *Kuyperian Commentary*, last modified December 23, 2020, <https://kuyperian.com/the-danger-of-servant-leadership/>. See also See Michael Foster and Bnonn Tennant, “The Compromise in Complementarianism,” *Discipleship and Dominion*, last modified November 26, 2019, <https://discipleshipanddominion.substack.com/p/complementarianism-presupposes-androgynism>.

<sup>30</sup> See Doug Wilson & Michael Foster, “How Complementarians Fall Short,” Canon Press, Youtube Video, 3:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=STt4H6Gsno>. Despite Foster’s claims to the contrary, when one takes even a cursory glance at the Danvers Statement, they find language like this in the second affirmation: “Distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order, and should find an echo in every human heart (Gen 2:18, 21-24; 1 Cor 11:7-9; 1 Tim 2:12-14).” The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, “The Danvers Statement,” last modified November 1988, <https://cbmw.org/about/danvers-statement/>.

<sup>31</sup> An example of this is the baseless, absurd, and even slanderous allegation(s) made by some patriarchy types to the effect that complementarianism has marxist roots, as Eric Conn and Joel Webbon allege here, “Complementarianism Was Forged In The Fires Of Marxism | John Piper, Carl Trueman, & Amie Byrd,” Right Response Ministries, Youtube Video, 7:21, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pcfl\\_8HVPtk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pcfl_8HVPtk).

<sup>32</sup> This charge also reveals either ignorance and/or misunderstanding of Grudem and Piper’s original arguments. See Piper’s essay, “Danvers, Nashville, and Early Complementarianism,” *Eikon*. 4.2 (2022): 28-33.

with beneficial differences,”<sup>33</sup> and one such beneficial difference is that male leadership<sup>34</sup> is an inescapable reality grounded in nature. Again, broad complementarianism affirms that it is more clarifying to include male headship (and yes, father rule) as subsets of the complementary ways in which God creates men and women for one another.

This tendency in biblical patriarchy to emphasize one good principle over and against another seems endemic to embracing a term in reaction to widespread cultural rejection. It is easy to wittingly or unwittingly imbibe vices associated with masculinity if one makes a practice of reveling in every label the world deems deplorable — or by taking the opposite position of whatever other Christians perceived to be to the “left” embrace. In so doing, they can become a caricature which lends itself to a deformed masculinity. It seems to me that if the biblical patriarchy movement applied the same hermeneutic of suspicion to patriarchy that they apply to complementarianism and servant leadership, they would be just as hesitant to embrace the former label as they are the latter two. Therefore, I find they are prone to falling for a false antithesis in reacting against the egalitarian/narrow complementarian pendulum swing. Put differently, if complementarity and/or servant leadership are to be heavily scrutinized or even rejected due to abuses and/or misapplication, then how can the “father rule” of patriarchy not fall by the same standard? Are we to believe there

are not just as many if not more examples of this principle being abused than with servant leadership?

When Piper and Grudem rejected terms such as patriarchy, hierarchicalism, or traditionalism in coining complementarianism, it was because they were convinced it was the most fitting term. I agree with them, and share DeYoung’s perspective that there is nothing to be gained from wearing the patriarchy badge,<sup>35</sup> *especially* if by embracing biblical patriarchy one is predisposed to look derisively upon the principle of servant leadership. I do not want to react to the errors of others in choosing a label, but instead aim to embrace all the Scripture teaches. I find broad complementarianism fits the bill. Now, egalitarians are just as militant against complementarianism as they are patriarchy, so I do not make this case from the posture of wanting to win friends and influence people on the left. The reason I believe broad complementarianism is preferable is for theological clarity and to avoid overcorrecting into a false antithesis. I find that broad complementarianism allows us to embrace the fullness of God’s intentions for men in the church, home, and society, without the baggage associated with the label patriarchy, overextending the covenantal aspects of male headship in the church and home into the societal sphere in ways not warranted in Scripture, or this reactionary posture towards servant leadership.

<sup>33</sup> The language of “equality with beneficial differences” comes from Piper and Grudem, as they argue: “If one word must be used to describe our position...we prefer the term complementarian, since it suggests both equality and beneficial differences between men and women.” *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 15.

<sup>34</sup> The careful reader may note the intentional shift I make here from “headship” to “leadership” when I get outside the covenantal context of the home. As I mention in the introduction, due to the fact that Scripture does not teach a federal headship or covenantal representation between all men and all women, but limits such headship to the church and home, I use “leadership” to distinguish between prudential application of nature/created order as it pertains to men and women in society, and the specific covenantal accountability a husband or pastor/elder has over those under their charge.

<sup>35</sup> See DeYoung, “Death to Patriarchy?”

In short, there is no choice between male headship and servant leadership put forward in Scripture; real men will lead and serve — and I find broad complementarianism best allows for us to hold these truths together in theory and practice. If by “biblical patriarchy” one intends to communicate essentially what I and others mean by broad complementarianism, then in the spirit of the Fellowship of the Ring, may evangelicalism have our sword, bow, and ax, and may we not wield them against one another.<sup>36</sup> This is why Naselli’s earlier comment is so important: *what matters most is not the label but what we mean by it*. My personal take is that some of these more outlandish charges made by emerging biblical patriarchy voices against complementarianism are not representative of the whole movement, and with recent books like Rosaria Butterfield’s *Five Lies For Our Anti-Christian Age* advancing biblical patriarchy, more conservative evangelicals will be open to the label. Again, if what what one *means* by biblical patriarchy is that male headship is part of God’s good design for the flourishing of the church, home, and broader society as a reflection of the created order, *and* that godly men will be marked by servant leadership as they follow Christ, then both broad complementarianism and biblical patriarchy are fitting labels indeed. And

for the sake of unity and clarity, then, I would humbly suggest that we all agree to call ourselves complementarians, with all the necessary nuances and qualifications offered in this essay.

## CONCLUSION

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Deformed masculinity results from affirming a false antithesis. In so doing, two complementary aspects of manhood are wrongly made out to compete with one another inherently. When it comes to principles such as male headship and servant leadership, we must be quick to celebrate and affirm what God calls good. Simply put, we cannot pick and choose what aspects or characteristics of masculinity we prefer and leave the others aside, or reject principles of biblical masculinity due to ways in which other professing Christians may abuse such doctrines. Falling prey to a false antithesis on masculinity is a surefire way to become a caricature and overcorrect into error as we swing the pendulum violently the other direction. Instead, we ought to hold to *all* the Bible calls good, allowing God’s Word to have its sanctifying effect upon us, de-caricaturing us by conforming us into the image of Christ.<sup>37</sup> ✕

<sup>36</sup> To be clear, I am arguing that the error of replacing servant leadership with male servitude is a bug, not a feature of complementarianism. Just as a man lording his headship over his household is a bug, not a feature of biblical patriarchy. I am genuinely convinced that the biblical, theological, and cultural instincts of broad complementarians and the biblical patriarchy movement are not that far apart. And it is my sincere hope that proponents in both movements would not talk past one another as we paint with broad brush strokes in denouncing one another. May the pendulum swinging stop, so that we could unite around glad-hearted promotion of all that God calls men to be and to do.

<sup>37</sup> When I claim that we are to be “de-caricatured” and conformed to the image of Christ, I do so from the perspective that “Christlikeness” is not androgynous. Therefore, while both men and women pursue Christlikeness, we do so in engendered ways. According to Paul, a husband pursuing Christlikeness will manifest itself in his headship over his wife in which he washes her in the water of the word, cherishing and nourishing his bride (Eph. 5:25-26; 1 Cor. 11:7-10). A wife who is pursuing Christlikeness will submit to her husband as the church submits to Christ, and as Christ in his human nature submits to the will of the Father (Eph. 5:24; 1 Cor. 11:3; John 6:28; 8:29). For more on this, see Jonathan Leeman’s interaction with Michael Bird in his essay “Biblical Manhood and Womanhood—Or Christlikeness?,” *9Marks*, last modified March 20, 2020, <https://www.9marks.org/article/biblical-manhood-and-womanhood-or-christlikeness/>.

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# Theological Language and the Fatherhood of God: An Exegetical and Dogmatic Account

The one true and living God is named Father in many texts of both the Old and New Testaments. Isaiah cries out to God on behalf of Israel, saying, “O LORD, you are our Father” (Isa. 64:8). Jesus taught his followers to address God as “Our Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:9). Paul says that Christians, who have the Spirit of God, cry out to God as “*Abba*, Father,” the very same cry by which Jesus addressed God in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before he was crucified (see Rom. 8:15 and Gal. 4:6, cf. Mark 14:46). It is hard to imagine a more basic instinct for the Christian than referring to God by the revealed name of Father.



Even so, the very notion of the fatherhood of God is a subject of much theological confusion, often characterized by muddled arguments, which leave in their wake befuddled minds. The cultural landscape of the Western world, with its ideological gender insanity, is not helping matters. Since the name Father is inescapably masculine, and since God is not a biologically sexed being, confusion over the fatherhood of God is not



surprising in our cultural moment. But it is nonetheless troubling! Christian theology is increasingly affected by a rising tide of influence from thinkers who wish to dismiss or diminish the theological significance of masculine names for God (and their accompanying masculine pronouns). This rising tide is battering the ramparts of sound doctrine with many different waves. That is, not all dismissive and diminishing voices are making the same arguments, but the variety of arguments have the same overall effect: the erosion of sound doctrine.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it seems to me that all such arguments have at least one common error, a failure to understand with precision the various ways Scripture predicates truths of God generally and the ways it names God as Father specifically.<sup>2</sup> Clear thinking coupled with uncompromising conviction must mark the way forward.

This essay will argue that Father is a divine name predicated of God properly, not figuratively. As such, it names God in two ways — personally and essentially — both of which find analogical correspondence in human fatherhood. This argument will be advanced in four movements: (I.) First, I will survey the scriptural significance of names in general and divine names in particular. (II.) Second, I will give a robust account of theological language, which is intended to be a synthesis of classical Christian theism concerning how Scripture norms the Christian doctrine of God. (III.) The third section of the essay will situate the name Father in this classical account of theological language, demonstrating it to be a properly predicated name in two ways: personal and essential. (IV.) In the final section of the essay, I will draw on the theological account of Father as a

“It is hard to imagine a more basic instinct for the Christian than referring to God by the revealed name of Father.”

<sup>1</sup> The primary purpose of this essay is to give a constructive account. Because of space considerations, I will not engage at great depth with the specific arguments of thinkers who have dismissed or diminished the theological significance of masculine names for God, but a brief sampling is in order here. (1) Radical feminist thinkers accuse historic Christian orthodoxy and even Scripture of promoting a view of God as male. It is argued that the preponderance of masculine names and pronouns for God found in Scripture and Christian tradition inescapably yield this conclusion. Therefore, traditional orthodox and biblical categories must be rejected (e.g. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* [Boston: Beacon, 1973]). (2) Other radical revisionists try to argue that the Bible itself supports current LGBTQ gender ideology. For a popular-level example, see the *New York Times* article by Jewish Rabbi, Mark Sameth, “Is God Transgender” (August 12, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/13/opinion/is-god-transgender.html>). In this approach, biblical categories need not be abandoned, just re-interpreted. (3) Evangelical egalitarians do not wish to replace masculine language, but they often argue for complementing masculine names like Father and Son with gender-neutral names like Parent and Child or feminine names like Mother and Daughter. Because God is not biologically sexed, masculine names are believed to be merely metaphorical, which allows for a high degree of flexibility with the ascription of gendered names (e.g., Amy Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022] and Ronald Pierce and Erin Heim, “Biblical Images of God as Mother and Spiritual Formation” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Ronald Pierce and Cynthia Long Westfall, 3rd ed. [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2021], 372-92).

<sup>2</sup> This essay is limited to the name Father. Other masculine predications, such as Son, and masculine pronouns are beyond the scope of the current work. The methodology deployed here, however, would be equally fruitful in thinking through the significance of all masculine divine predications, indeed divine predications of all kinds. I hope to engage in a larger project of demonstrating the usefulness of carefully defined categories of theological language in offering a constructive account of the Christian doctrine of God at some point in the future.

divine name to suggest some limited points of analogical correspondence between divine and human fatherhood.<sup>3</sup>

## I. THE SCRIPTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NAMES

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For medieval scholastics like Thomas Aquinas, the category of divine names referred to any predication made of God in any way. Thus, all distinctions between different kinds of speech about God are made under the heading: “The Names of God.”<sup>4</sup> The Reformers and post-Reformation Reformed Orthodox theologians took a somewhat different approach. For them the category of the names of God was much narrower than Thomas’s. They treated the divine names as designations for God found explicitly and verbally in the biblical text. Names are ascribed to God in a proper way, meaning they are not mere metaphors or figures of speech. Furthermore, what the Reformed consider to be a divine name is the kind of designation for God that can be fittingly used as the grammatical subject of a sentence, which seems to be one of the chief ways a name is distinguished from an attribute.

The reason for this narrower account of what constitutes a divine name is the Reformation’s emphasis on the unique authority of Scripture as the very word of God written (*sola scriptura*) and the commitment to letting the text of Scripture regulate dogmatic formulation of the doctrine of God. As Richard Muller observes in his magisterial *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, “From the time of Zwingli onward . . . the names of God provided the Reformed with a primary source and focus” for theology proper as a whole. He goes on to suggest that the reason for this move is a “fundamental biblicism”<sup>5</sup> and a conviction that the divine names offer

<sup>3</sup> In an earlier essay for *Eikon*, I reviewed “Biblical Images of God as Mother and Spiritual Formation” by Pierce and Heim. In that work, I laid out a very basic map of theological language as a tool to critique the proposal by Pierce and Heim. This essay is more broadly constructive in nature and less narrowly polemical. As a result, the account of theological language is considerably more robust and comprehensive. Nevertheless, where there is overlap, some brief sections of this essay are drawn heavily from the earlier piece. See Kyle Claunch, “On the Improper Use of Proper Speech: A Review Essay,” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 51 (Spring 2023), 67–75.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (ST), q. 13, “The Names of God.”

<sup>5</sup> Of late, the term biblicism has taken on a negative connotation, often being used to refer to a naive reading of Scripture uninformed by the insights of the orthodox Christian exegetical and dogmatic heritage. Muller does not use the term in this way. Muller understands that the Reformed Orthodox theologians were very conversant with the key Christian voices from the past, drawing heavily on tradition as a guard and guide in their own understanding and exposition of holy Scripture. Muller is using the term to describe the commitment the Reformed had to the utterly unique authority of Scripture as the *norma normans* (ruling rule) over against Christian tradition as a *norma normata* (ruled rule). Rhyne Putman addresses the unfortunate connotation of the term biblicism and uses the term “naive biblicism” to differentiate the two senses with which the term can be used today. See “Baptists, *Sola Scriptura*, and the Place of Christian Tradition” in *Baptists and the Christian Tradition*, ed. Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps [Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020], 27–54.

a primary exegetical pathway into theology proper as a dogmatic locus.<sup>6</sup>

The Reformed focus on the biblical divine names did not mean that they were in fundamental disagreement with Aquinas about the nature of theological language predicated of God. Rather, as will be shown, there was a high degree of agreement between Thomas and the Reformed Orthodox. Nor did this emphasis mean that Reformed thinkers gave no attention to broader dogmatic themes in the doctrine of God, such as divine attributes and Trinitarian relations. Far from it, they are known for their robust and lengthy accounts of these matters. Rather, they emphasized the divine names in order to facilitate such dogmatic considerations. Seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian Petrus Van Mastricht, for example, offers an extensive treatise on the divine names and the relationship of names to the rest of the doctrine of God. He says, “The nature of God is made known to us by his names.” He goes on to explain that the names of God (1) reveal the divine essence, (2) distinguish the true God from false gods and creatures, and (3) disclose his properties (attributes and eternal triune relations).<sup>7</sup> Following the example of our Reformed forebears, let us consider the theological significance of the divine names revealed in Scripture.

### *The Significance of Names in Scripture*

In Scripture, a person’s name signifies something more than the particular phonemes (sounds) or graphemes (written letters) by which a person is identified. Two general truths about the significance of names should be observed. First, names are given by one with authority to one under authority. In Genesis 1:26, God names mankind (אָדָם, a name designating both the genus of humanity and the specific name of the first male human created). Adam, who is given dominion over the animals on the earth, names the animals (Gen. 2:19-20). Significantly, Adam also names the woman as a particular type of human (Gen. 2:23) and later gives her the specific name, Eve (Gen. 3:20). Furthermore, parents, who have authority over their children, give names to their children, who are to honor and obey their parents (Ex. 20:12, Eph. 6:1).

<sup>6</sup> Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520-1725, Vol. 3: The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 246.

<sup>7</sup> Petrus Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Divinity, Vol. 2: Faith in the Triune God*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids, MI: RHB, 2019), 97-98. Later he says, “In the calling of God by names, his attributes come forth” (116).

Second, the name of a person generally signifies some truth about the person so named. The name woman signifies that she is created from the man (Gen. 2:23), and the name Eve is derived from a Hebrew word meaning “living” because she is “the mother of all living” (Gen. 3:20) humanity. In the case of parents naming their children in Scripture, names often signify some feature about the child’s birth.<sup>8</sup> In other instances, the names of children reflect some prophetic expectation based on divine revelation.<sup>9</sup> Still other times, a child’s name reflects something of the circumstances in the land where the child is born.<sup>10</sup> There are even times in Scripture when a person’s name is either changed by God or some new name is given in addition to a prior name because the person’s life has been changed by God.<sup>11</sup> In all such cases, the common thread is the revelatory significance of a given name.

### *The Significance of Divine Names in Scripture*

The names of God in Scripture are similarly significant. First, since names are given by one in authority to one under authority, it should not surprise us to find that God names himself in Scripture. This pattern of naming signifies the fact that God is not beholden to anyone. He is not given names by his creatures but reveals his names to his creatures. The paradigmatic passage for understanding this truth is Exodus 3:1-15, the historical narrative of the call of Moses at the burning bush. Here it is abundantly

<sup>8</sup> Isaac means “laughter” because Sarai laughs in mockery at the announcement of his birth and also because there will be laughter of joy when Isaac is finally born (Gen. 18:10-15, 21:1-7). Esau means “red” because the boy was covered in red hair when he was born while the name Jacob means “supplanter” or “one who grabs the heel”, indicating the fact that he was grasping his brother’s heel in a prophetically symbolic gesture of the effort he would later expend to take from his brother the position of privilege normally associated with birth order (Gen. 25:24-26).

<sup>9</sup> Consider the children born to Isaiah — *Shear-Jashub* and *Maher-shalal-hash-baz* — whose names mean “a remnant shall return” and “swift is the spoil, quick is the prey,” respectively (Isa. 7:3, 8:3-4). The name of the child prophesied to Ahaz would be *Immanuel*, meaning “God with us,” a name which spoke of the covenant faithfulness of God to Israel in its immediate circumstances and also typologically pointed forward to Jesus, who is “God with us” in the flesh by way of the incarnation (Isa. 7:14, cf. Matt. 1:22). The name Jesus itself is identical to the name of Joshua in the OT and means “the LORD saves.” The angel tells Mary and Joseph to name this child Jesus because he, being the incarnation of the LORD, will save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). The names of Hosea’s children — *Jezreel*, *Lo-ammi*, and *Lo-ruhamma* — mean disaster, not my people, and no mercy, respectively as an indicator of the LORD’s judgment on Israel as they go into exile.

<sup>10</sup> Peleg means “division” because “in his days, the earth was divided” (Gen. 10:25). Consider also the name of Eli’s grandson, *Ichabod*, whose name means “the glory has departed” because he was born at a time when the ark of the covenant had been captured and the wicked priests of Israel had fallen in battle (1 Sam. 4:19-22).

<sup>11</sup> The most obvious examples here include Abram, whose name is changed to Abraham by the LORD (Gen. 17:5); Sarai, whose name is changed to Sarah (Gen. 17:15); and Simon, who is given the new name Peter by Jesus (Matt. 16:18). These examples of name changes or new names given seem to be types of the reality that is true of all the redeemed people of God, who will be given a new name in glory, a name that corresponds to our status as redeemed and glorified, fully conformed to the image of Christ in the age to come (see Isa. 62:1-2 and Rev. 2:17). In all such cases, the common thread is the revelatory significance of a given proper name with respect to the one named.

*“If Moses would know the name of God, it would have to be made known to him by revelation from God.”*

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clear that the act of naming the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a divine prerogative. Moses asks God his name, and God answers,

“I AM who I AM. And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel: I AM has sent me to you.’ God also said to Moses, ‘Say this to the people of Israel: “The LORD [יהוה], the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.” This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations” (Ex. 3:14-15).

Moses could not choose a name for God based on some mere metaphorical association drawn from the creaturely realm, nor based on his own reason, preference, or imagination. If Moses would know the name of God, it would have to be made known to him by revelation from God. “What is your name?” says Moses. “This is my name,” says the LORD.

The burning bush passage is paradigmatic in that it states clearly what is implied in many other passages involving divine names. For example, In Genesis 16:13, Hagar calls the name of the LORD “You are a God of seeing” (אֱלֹהֵי רֹאֵי, *El Roi*). There is no account of Hagar asking God his name, nor any indication that the LORD said to Hagar, “This is my name: *El Roi*.” Nevertheless, Hagar’s naming of God is in response to God’s revelation of himself. Hagar fled from the presence of Abram and Sarai and was desperate and alone in the wilderness where she believed she and the child in her womb



would surely perish. It is then that the LORD “found her” and spoke to her words of promise and instruction. She would bear a son who would live and flourish, and she should return to Sarai and bear the son for Abram. Note that the LORD *found* Hagar, not the other way around. The name by which Hagar referred to God — “God of seeing” — was a response to his revelation of himself. Thus, the late nineteenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck was right when he said, “We do not name God; he names himself,” a sentiment he further clarified by saying, “What God reveals of himself is expressed and conveyed in specific names. To his creatures he grants the privilege of naming and addressing him on the basis of, and in keeping with, his revelation.”<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, as with scriptural names in general, divine names signify truths concerning the nature of God. Again, the burning bush passage demonstrates the point. When Moses asks God his name, God says, “I AM WHO I AM” (אהיה אשר אהיה, Ex. 3:14). He goes on to offer the most prominent name for God in all of Scripture, the LORD, which in Hebrew is four letters (יהוה, *YHWH*), the famed tetragrammaton, the sacred name. This name, the LORD, is to be the name by which God is known “forever, throughout all your generations” (v. 15). Though the details are disputed, it is generally agreed that the name *YHWH* is grammatically derived from the name “I AM,” expressing the same truth in the third person. Pre-modern theologians and exegetes tended to see this name as revealing the *aseity* of God, the fact that God is not dependent on anything external to himself for his being and existence. Thus, he reveals himself by the name of *being* itself. All other beings receive their existence from God, but God has his existence from no other. In other words, God exists from himself (Latin, *a se*).

The enduring influence of the Hellenization thesis might lead one to think that the notion of aseity is too philosophical and foreign to the context of the passage itself.<sup>13</sup> Thus, some prefer alternative interpretations.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2: *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 98-99.

<sup>13</sup> The Hellenization thesis was popularized by the German liberal historian and theologian, Adolf Von Harnack. He argued that Christian theology in the early centuries of the church became enslaved to Greek (Hellenistic) philosophical categories, especially various forms of Platonism. As such, orthodox Christian theology, according to the Hellenization thesis, bears little resemblance to the text of Scripture.

<sup>14</sup> See Peter Enns, *Exodus in The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000) and Terence Fretheim, *Exodus: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: WJK, 1991).

Good work has been done, however, demonstrating that the Scriptures presuppose philosophical commitments concerning the nature of being and existence (metaphysics) and that the Hellenization thesis is drastically overstated.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the exegetical case for linking the divine name (“I AM” / “the LORD”) to the aseity of God is quite strong. It is undeniable that God chooses a form of the being verb to answer Moses’s question about his unique name. This indicates that God’s name is irreducibly ontological, revealing the mode of his existence, which is altogether independent. Who is God? He simply *is*! Put differently, he is the existing one who receives his life from none, but possesses it fully of himself (*a se*, cf. John 5:26). Furthermore, the visible manifestation of God as a flame seems to correspond to the verbal revelation of the divine name. When Moses first sees the burning bush, his curiosity is aroused by the fact that “the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed” (Ex. 3:2). In his eighty years of life, Moses had undoubtedly seen a flame before, and he had probably even seen a flame burning in a bush before. But he had never seen a flame burning in a bush that did not consume the bush as fuel. This utterly unique flame-bush relation provoked Moses to say to himself, “I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned” (v. 3). In every observable case of burning flames, the flame is dependent on fuel to burn. Take away the fuel, extinguish the flame. But this flame does not consume fuel. It is a self-burning flame, just as the great “I AM,” whose presence is represented by the flame, is the self-existent God. God’s name (“I AM” / “the LORD”) reveals an attribute of his nature (aseity). Whether revealing the attributes of God’s nature or the eternal relations of the three distinct persons, names predicated of God reveal truths about God.



This section has shown the significance of names in Scripture in general in order to make some basic observations about the significance of the names of God in particular. Names are given by one in authority to one under authority. As such, no creature can name God. Rather, God names himself and reveals his name to creatures. Names also reveal certain truths about the one named. The names by which God makes himself known reveal his attributes and Trinitarian relations.

<sup>15</sup> See Steven Doby, *God in Himself* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019) and Craig Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

## II. CLASSICAL THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE: A CONCEPTUAL MAP

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The purpose of this section is to synthesize the insights of a massive theological tradition regarding the ways that Scripture predicates truth of God. This tradition's roots extend from the patristic period through Western medieval theological scholasticism and into the Reformation and post-Reformation eras of Christian theological reflection. Many have referred to the Christian doctrine of God as expressed by this tradition as classical theism. Standing on the shoulders of giants, I hope to offer a conceptual schema that is descriptive of Scripture's various modes of discourse with respect to theology proper. Insofar as the schema is faithfully *descriptive* of Scripture's own modes of discourse, it should also be *prescriptive* in the sense that it helps readers of Scripture recognize the nature of the language being deployed in a given scriptural context where truths about God are being conveyed.<sup>16</sup>

### *Analogical Language in Scripture*

All true creaturely language about God is *analogical*. This claim is a recognition of two facts. First, God has chosen to reveal himself truly to creatures in a way that can be understood by creatures, namely through created words. Second, words predicated of God do not mean *exactly the same thing* in God as when predicated of creatures. Rather, words predicated of God are true of God in ways that transcend the limits of created reality. In any analogy, two things correspond to one another in ways that are similar and dissimilar. In the case of analogical language predicated of God, the two things, words and God, do not bear an exact similitude with no remainder. Rather, the fullness of God's being transcends the capacity of meaning conveyed by finite words.

<sup>16</sup> While some will be skeptical of a conceptual schema or map of the nature of scriptural theological language, it should be noted that something of this sort is necessary for anyone operating on the assumption that Scripture is consistent and coherent in all that it says. If there is not some way of adjudicating the nature of the claim being made about God in a given text, then one will be forced to say that Scripture is self-contradictory. Does God "relent" (נחם, see Genesis 6:5, 1 Samuel 15:11, 35), or doesn't he (see Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:29; cf. Malachi 3:6)? Without a conceptual schema of some kind, there is no way to reconcile these seemingly contradictory predications. I submit that a carefully thought-out conceptual schema that consciously draws on some of the strongest witnesses from Christian history in an effort to synthesize the best of their insights is a better alternative than a spontaneous and imprecise schema that is simply intuited every time an apparent theological difficulty emerges from the text of Scripture.



The idea that all language about God is analogical stands in stark contrast to two alternative proposals. First, the theory of analogical language stands in contrast to the theory of *univocal language*. If words spoken about God are univocal, then the meaning of the word discloses exactly what is true about God without remainder. The implication of this theory is that God can be comprehended intellectually (i.e., exhaustively understood) by finite creatures. Most theologians in the classical tradition have recognized that this would blur the Creator/creature distinction by reducing the being of God to the level of creatures. Second, the theory of analogical language stands in contrast to the theory of *equivocal language* about God. If words spoken about God are equivocal, then the meaning of a word does not disclose anything true about God. To equivocate is to express two altogether different things with the same word. To hold a theory of equivocal language about God would be to embrace a kind of functional deism in which all speech about God is merely a blind guess concerning the reality of one who is utterly unknowable. The analogical theory of theological predication affirms the fittingness of created words spoken about God to reveal truth concerning him (John 17:17) while acknowledging that the LORD's being is ultimately beyond all comparison (Isa. 46:5, 9) and his ways "inscrutable" on account of his infinite glory (Rom. 11:33).

The distinction between univocal and equivocal language has roots in Aristotle, who, in his *Metaphysics*, proposed the notion of *analogia* as a middle way of predication. This feature of Aristotelian thought makes its way into Christian theology through early medieval thinkers like Boethius, who wrote a commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.<sup>17</sup> However, it was Aquinas who applied these categories explicitly to the doctrine of God and gave the magisterial description that would be firmly fixed in Christian theological discourse moving forward.

Thomas considers the divine attribute of wisdom and observes that the term *wise* is not predicated of God and man in exactly the same way. Wisdom in man is a quality distinct from his essence and existence. Whereas in God,

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of Aristotle's and Boethius's notions of analogy in predication, see Steven J. Duby, *God in Himself*, 242-44.

wisdom is identical to his essence and existence, per the doctrine of divine simplicity. Furthermore, we can fully comprehend the meaning of the term *wise* when applied to man, but we cannot fully comprehend the meaning of the term *wise* when applied to God, who is incomprehensible. From this, Thomas concludes:

Hence it is evident that this term *wise* is not applied in the same way to God and to man. The same rule applies to other terms. Hence no name is predicated univocally of God and of creatures. Neither, on the other hand are names applied to God and creatures in a purely equivocal sense, as some have said. Because if that were so, it follows that from creatures nothing could be known or demonstrated about God at all; for the reasoning would always be exposed to the fallacy of equivocation. . . . Therefore, it must be said that these names are said of God and creatures in an analogous sense, i.e., according to proportion.<sup>18</sup>

It is unsurprising that later Roman Catholic theologians would follow Thomas with respect to these distinctions, but some are quite surprised to learn that the Reformed theological tradition takes the notion of analogical language as a given. John Calvin warned of the limitations of creaturely comprehension of the immeasurable and spiritual essence of God, explaining that divine revelation is accommodated to our finite mode of understanding. He writes, “[A]s nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us.” In this way, Calvin explains, God “accommodates the knowledge of him to our slight capacity.”<sup>19</sup> Nearly one hundred years later, the successor to Calvin’s chair at Geneva, Francis Turretin, would state plainly that the attributes of God are “not predicated of God and creatures univocally. . . . Nor are they predicated equivocally. . . . They are predicated analogically.”<sup>20</sup> Bavinck could summarize his account of the nature of theological language by saying, “Our knowledge of God is always only analogical in character, that is, shaped by analogy to what can be discerned of God in his creatures.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Aquinas, *ST*, I, q. 13, a. 5.

<sup>19</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 113.1.

<sup>20</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 190.

<sup>21</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:110.

## *Proper and Figurative Predication*

Serious Christian thinkers must acknowledge the basic truth of God's transcendence and creaturely limitations when speaking of God on pain of collapsing the Creator/creature distinction. A commitment to the analogical theory of language about God has proven to be the most consistent way that classical Christian thinkers have accomplished this. While all scriptural predications of God are analogical, not all analogical predication in Scripture functions the same way. Some analogical predications are *proper*, and some are *figurative*.

The simplest way to describe the difference between proper and figurative predication is to consider which direction the analogy runs between God and creation. The analogical theory of language indicates that there is a comparison between a term predicated of creatures and the same term predicated of God. There is similarity and dissimilarity. The analogical predicate is *proper* if the notion has its origin in God and its analog in creation. The predicate is *figurative* if the origin is in creation and the analog is in God.

Let us return to Aquinas's discussion of the divine attribute of wisdom. The term *wise* is true of God in himself even when there is nothing else in existence that can be called wise. When God creates men and angels and gives them the capacity for wisdom, the term *wise* can be predicated of such creatures by way of participation. Divine wisdom precedes creaturely wisdom, and divine wisdom is the infinite perfection of which creaturely wisdom is but a shadow. Because wisdom is in God originally and in creatures derivatively, the term *wise* is predicated of God properly.<sup>22</sup> The analogy runs from God to creatures.

On the other hand, when a term is predicated of God which is true of creatures in a primary way, that term is understood to be figurative with respect to God. For example, when Scripture ascribes human body parts to God, we are to recognize that such body parts are proper to human beings

<sup>22</sup> The entire book of Proverbs can be put forward as biblical support for this. The whole book calls upon the people of God to walk in wisdom, which has its beginning in the fear of God. Wisdom, Solomon tells us, is in God and with God eternally, and with wisdom, God created the world (Prov. 8:22-31). Thus, creatures are called to be wise in a manner that corresponds analogically to the original and perfect wisdom of God.

and only spoken of God as a figure of speech. Proverbs 5:21 says, “For a man’s ways are before *the eyes of the LORD*, and he ponders all his paths.” Because Scripture plainly teaches that God is an infinite, invisible, immaterial spirit, we know that eyes are predicated of God figuratively. The figure of speech refers to the perfect knowledge of God with respect to all the ways of men. Eyes are predicated of God figuratively to reveal his comprehensive knowledge, which is true of God properly. The analogy runs from creatures to God.

All figurative language is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. It communicates what is true of one thing in terms proper to another thing. Metaphor can take many specific forms. *Simple metaphor* is the identification of one thing by the name of another thing. “The LORD is my rock” (2 Sam. 22:2) is a prime example. *Simile* is a type of metaphor that makes the comparison with the words “like” or “as.” When he judges the kingdom of Judah, “The LORD is like an enemy” (Lam. 2:5). *Metonymy* is a metaphor in which a concrete object symbolizes an abstract quality, such as a divine attribute. When the psalmist says, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever” (Ps. 45:6), throne symbolizes God’s sovereignty. Theological *anthropomorphism* (in the form of a man) is a metaphor in which human body parts are ascribed to God in order to reveal some truth about him (see Prov. 5:21 above — “the eyes of the LORD”). Theological *anthropopathism* (after the passions of a man) is the predication of human suffering or changing emotional states to God, as when regret and grief are predicated of God (Gen. 6:6).

Again, Aquinas discusses the distinction between what I am calling proper and figurative predication. In Question 13, Article 6 of his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas asks whether names predicated of God are predicated primarily to creatures. He answers that some things predicated of God are true of God primarily and of creatures secondarily (analogy runs from God to creatures), while other things are true of creatures primarily and predicated of God in a secondary sense (analogy runs from creatures to God). To discuss things true of God primarily, Aquinas appeals to the attributes of goodness and wisdom. Concerning

goodness and wisdom, for example, Thomas says, “[T]hese names are applied primarily to God rather than to creatures, because these perfections flow from God to creatures.”<sup>23</sup> Thomas contrasts this mode of predication, which I am calling proper, with another mode of predication in which the names are “applied metaphorically to God,” which is to say, “applied to creatures primarily rather than to God, because when said of God they mean only similitudes to such creatures. . . . Thus it is clear that applied to God the signification of names can be defined only from what is said of creatures.”<sup>24</sup> This is the mode of predication I am calling figurative.

Turretin recognizes this same distinction. Turretin defines analogical language as one name being predicated to more than one thing. Regarding analogical predication of God, he says that sometimes the name “may be said of one primarily or principally or by priority, but of the others secondarily and by posteriority on account of dependence on that first.”<sup>25</sup> He goes on to say that the communicable attributes of God are predicated of God in this way — spoken primarily of God and secondarily of creatures. This is what I mean by proper predication. In his exposition of the various divine attributes, Turretin recognizes that Scripture sometimes speaks of God in a way that is primarily proper to creatures and only secondarily to God. For example, defending the immutability of God, he says, “Repentance is attributed to God after the manner of men (*anthropopathos*).”<sup>26</sup> That is, repentance is proper to men and only figuratively spoken of God in order to convey his holiness and the seriousness of human sin in relation to the holy God.

Van Mastricht is explicit in his recognition of this distinction, even using the terms proper and figurative. He says, “Regarding names that are proper . . . theologians observe that in a primary sense they apply to God, and in a secondary sense to creatures.”<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, Van Mastricht avers,

<sup>23</sup> Aquinas, *ST I*. q. 13, a. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Aquinas, *ST I*. q. 13, a. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:190.

<sup>26</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:206.

<sup>27</sup> Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 2:99.

*“...all scriptural language about God is analogical, but not all analogical language is predicated of God in the same way”.*

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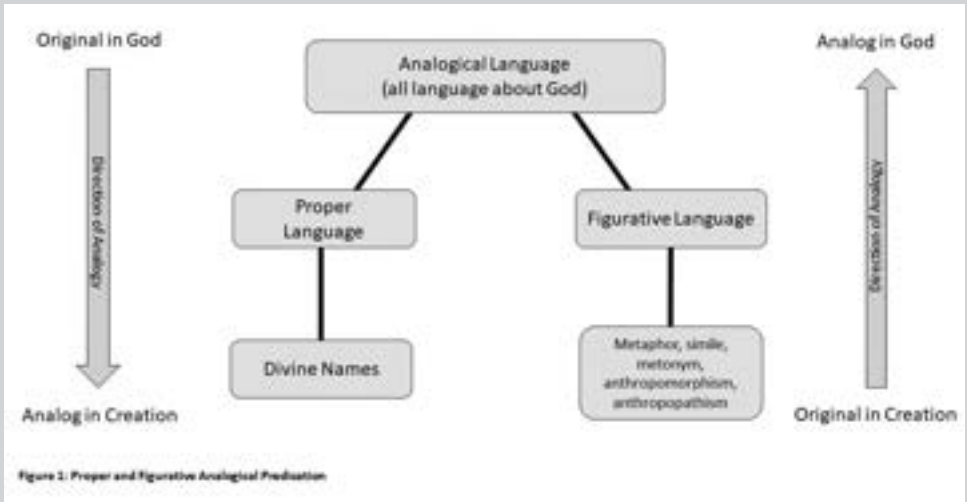
“[T]he figurative names (as secondary) apply to God either metonymically, when for example he is called our strength, help, light, and salvation (Ps. 18:1; 27:1), or metaphorically, as when he is called a shield or sun (Ps. 84:11; Isa. 10:17), or when these metaphorical names are obtained from man or any other creatures.”<sup>28</sup>

Thus far, it has been argued that all scriptural language about God is analogical, but not all analogical language is predicated of God in the same way. Sometimes analogical predicates have their original in God and their analog in creation. This mode of predication is what we are calling proper predication. Other times analogical predicates have their original in creation and their analog in God. This includes many forms of metaphorical speech. This is what we are calling figurative predication.

We observed earlier that divine names are revealed by God, not given by creatures. Further, the names of God reveal truths about God to his people, which is why Reformed theologians have tended to see the scriptural names of God as the exegetical pathway into the doctrine of God. Where do the names of God, as the Reformed tended to use that terminology, fit into this schematic map of theological language? For the Protestant Scholastic tradition, especially the Reformed Orthodox, all divine names fit the category of what I am calling proper predication, not figurative predication.<sup>29</sup> See “Figure 1” below for a visual diagram of the conceptual schema as explained thus far.

<sup>28</sup> Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 2:99.

<sup>29</sup> At this point my distinctions differ formally from Thomas Aquinas, even though the material content of the categories is the same. As noted above, Thomas treats the names of God as the broadest category. By “name,” Thomas simply means any kind of predication. Thus, for Thomas, all names are analogical; some are proper, and some are figurative/metaphorical. I prefer to follow the Reformed pattern of treating the names of God as a narrower category, that is designations for God that can be appropriately used as the grammatical subject of a sentence.



### *Divine Names: Essential and Personal*

In addition to the things already observed about divine names, one further distinction needs to be made. Some names of God are *essential*; other names are *personal*. Essential divine names refer to that by which God is one — the divine essence. Essential names are proper to all three divine persons because all three have the same divine essence. Personal names, on the other hand, name the mode of subsistence of one divine person in relation to another. Personal names are proper to only one divine person because the eternal relation, which is designated by the personal name, is the only feature that distinguishes one person from another in the eternal life of God.

Because essential names are predicated of the divine essence, they correspond very closely to the divine attributes. As noted earlier, the attributes are most fittingly understood as descriptions of the divine nature that fill in the meaning of the divine names — essential names to be precise. Since the sacred name *YHWH* reveals the aseity and immutability of God (along with the other incommunicable attributes), it is rightly understood to be an essential name. As such, it is true of all three divine persons. Scripture bears this out by ascribing the name to all three persons explicitly. For example, in 1 Corinthians 8:6, the apostle Paul gives a Trinitarian interpretation of the famed *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4, which says, “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one.” Paul, contrasting the Christian faith with pagan

polytheism, writes, “Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” The one LORD (*YHWH*) of Deuteronomy 6:4 is understood to be the name of both the Father and the Son in 1 Corinthians 8:6.<sup>30</sup> Paul also identifies the person of the Holy Spirit with the name *YHWH* when he says, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17). Here, Paul uses the Greek word *κύριος* (the “Lord”) to refer to the name *YHWH*, which follows the standard pattern of his day, as illustrated by the Septuagint.<sup>31</sup> Thus, *YHWH*, which is predicated of all three persons in Scripture, is an essential name of God, naming that which the persons have in common, the divine essence.

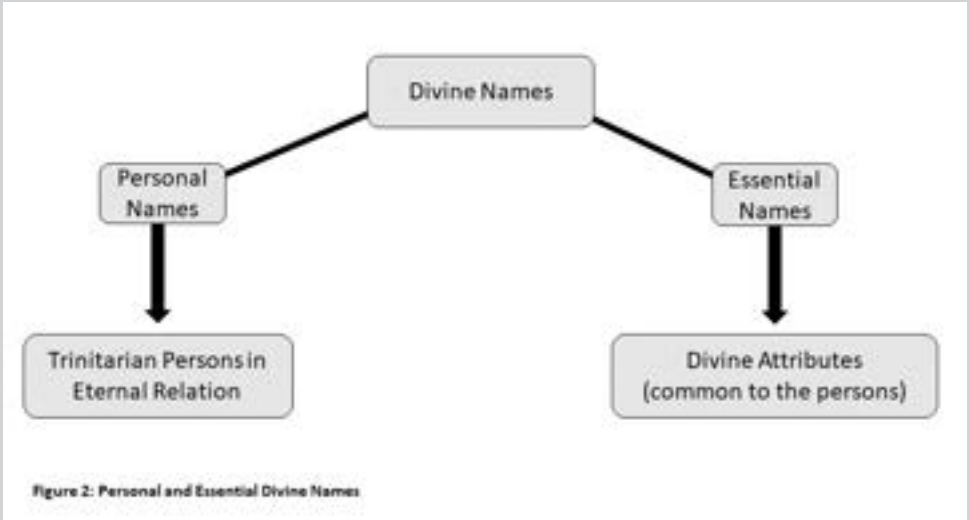
Personal names are fundamentally relational names in that they name the divine persons distinctly by identifying the relations between the divine persons. The personal name of the first person of the Godhead is Father, and the second person's personal name is Son. The Father is so named because his mode of subsistence as God is *from no one else*, but the Son subsists as God *from the Father*. The names Father and Son do not point out any unique attributes of the respective natures of each person. This would be impossible because they share identically the same nature (“the LORD is one”). Rather, the names Father and Son are distinct only in relation to one another. The meaning of the personal name Father is an empty set except in relation to the Son, who is the eternal “only begotten of the Father” (John 1:14). Concerning the third person, his personal name is Spirit, which translates the Hebrew (רוח) and Greek (*πνεῦμα*) terms that mean “breath.” As the one “who proceeds from the Father” (John 15:26) and is the “Spirit of his Son” (Gal. 4:6, cf. Rom. 8:9), the Spirit subsists as God breathed out from the Father and the Son. The personal name Spirit does not point out some attribute of the

<sup>30</sup> Most NT scholars recognize Paul's intentional exegetical incorporation of Jesus into the very identity of *YHWH*. Mark Taylor, for example, observes that 1 Corinthians 8:6 “takes up the terms ‘God’ and ‘Lord’ in a remarkable reformulation of the *Shema* of Deut 6:4, already alluded to in 8:4b. Verse 6 explicitly brings Jesus into the definition of the one true God.” See *1 Corinthians*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 28, The New American Commentary [Nashville, TN: B&H, 2014], 206. Steven J. Duby says that this verse is Paul's “Christianized version of the *Shema*.” Based on Paul's teaching, Duby concludes that “each person, while being distinct from the other, is somehow identical to this God, the God of Israel.” See *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism: Biblical Christology in Light of the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2022), 62–63. Many other texts equate Jesus with *YHWH* by applying OT texts that name *YHWH* to Jesus explicitly. Examples include Mark 1:3 (Isa. 40:3), Rom. 10:17 (Joel 2:32), and Heb. 1:7 (Ps. 104:4).

<sup>31</sup> That *κύριος* refers to *YHWH*, the sacred name, is clear from the context as well. Paul is exegeting Exodus 34:29–35 where the glory shining from Moses' face is clearly the glory of *YHWH*. So, David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 196.



third person's essence that distinguishes him from the Father and the Son because he shares with them identically the same essence. Rather, the term Spirit is a relational name, which only has distinct meaning when understood in relation to the Father and the Son. "Figure 2" below diagrams the distinction between essential and personal names.



The distinction between what I am calling essential and personal divine names is upheld by all orthodox theologians, even if different terms are deployed. One of the clearest and most enduring articulations of this distinction comes in Augustine's *De Trinitate*. In Augustine's day, the Arian heretics argued that everything predicated of God is said of him "substance-wise." This would entail two different essences of the Father and Son.<sup>32</sup> Augustine responded by recognizing that *many things* are said of God substance-wise, such as wisdom, goodness, knowledge, and the divine name, "I AM." He went on to argue, though, that *not everything* said of God is said of him substance-wise. This does not mean that God has accidental properties by which he can change. That is, for Augustine, nothing is predicated of God "modification-wise," because God can in no wise be modified. Augustine observes, however, that some things are said of God "relationship-wise." He explains, "If . . . what is called Father were called so with reference to itself and not to the Son, and what is called Son were called so with reference to itself and

<sup>32</sup> The word "substance" is used by Augustine synonymously with my use of "essence." He clarifies that he is using the term as an equivalent of the Greek *ousia*, which is commonly translated essence. Thus, "substance-wise" is synonymous with "essential" (*De Trinitate* [The Trinity], ed. John E. Rotelle, OSA, trans. Edmund Hill, OP, 2nd ed. [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012] 51.6).

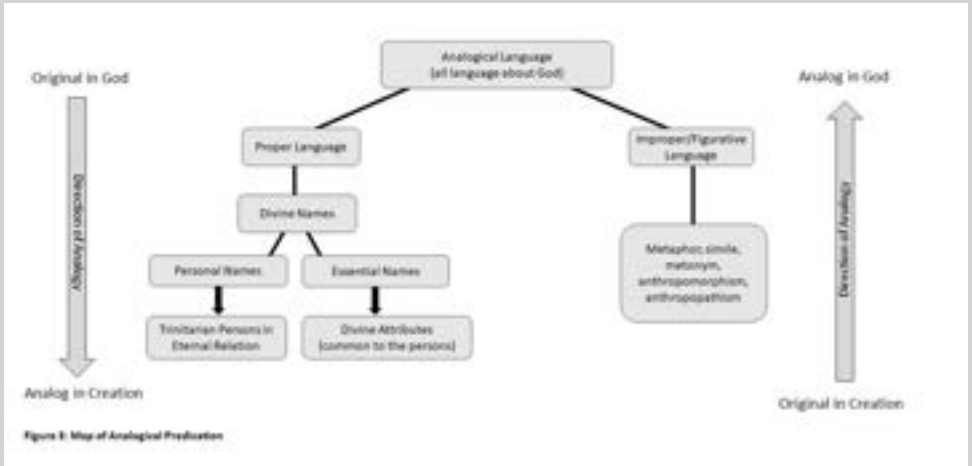
not to the Father, the one would be called Father and the other Son substance-wise.” But the Father is not called Father in reference to himself, only in reference to the Son. Augustine continues, “Since the Father is only called so because he has a Son, and the Son is only called so because he has a Father, these things are not said substance wise.” If not substance-wise and not modification-wise, then how are the names Father and Son predicated of the one God? Augustine answers, “relationship-wise.”<sup>33</sup> The terms substance-wise and relationship-wise, as Augustine uses them here, correspond to essential and personal names as I use those terms.

Van Mastricht acknowledges the same distinction and uses the exact terminology of essential and personal names. In his extensive discussion of the divine names, Van Mastricht asks, “How many kinds of names of God are there?” He answers, “[T]he divine names are said to be either essential, such as *Jehovah* and *θεός*, God; or personal, such as *Elohim*, *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Spirit*.”<sup>34</sup> Van Mastricht recognizes the same distinction between essential and personal names that I am advocating here, which is materially the same thing as Augustine’s distinction between substance-wise predication and relationship-wise predication.

To sum up this section, all true creaturely predication about God (including scriptural predication) is analogical in nature. Analogical predication can be proper, in which case the analogy runs from God to creatures, or figurative, in which case the analogy runs from creatures to God. Figurative predication can take many forms, such as simple metaphor, metonymy, anthropomorphism, and anthropopathism. Proper speech includes divine names, which can be either essential or personal. Essential names reveal divine attributes, which are common to the whole Trinity because they are predicated of God according to the unity of the divine essence. Personal names reveal the distinction between the three Trinitarian persons by pointing out their eternal relations to one another. “*Figure 3*” below diagrams the conceptual schema, as presented thus far in this essay.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, 51.6.

<sup>34</sup> Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 2:99, italics in original. Van Mastricht locates the name *Elohim* under the category of personal name because he is convinced that the plural form of the name indicates the plurality of persons in the divine essence. While I am sympathetic to a Trinitarian interpretation of the plural name, I still think it is predicated of God essentially because the same name can be equally predicated of any or all of the persons. In other words, it does not point out a relation but something true of all three, which, by definition, makes it an essential name. In any case, though we differ on the categorization of the name *elohim*, Van Mastricht’s categories agree with the ones I’m proposing here in terminology and material content. Furthermore, they agree with Augustine’s distinctions in material content.



### III. Father as a Divine Name

With this map of classical theological predication in place, we are finally ready to return to the specific issue of the divine name Father. As a divinely revealed name, Father is predicated of God properly, not figuratively. Furthermore, Father is both an essential name and a personal name.

#### *Father as Proper Predication*

By saying that Father is a divine name predicated of God properly, I am saying that human fatherhood is a secondary analog of divine fatherhood, which is primary. This is of vital importance to the current debates about the significance of this divine name, because it is abundantly common for contemporary Christians to state that the name Father is figurative language, a mere a metaphor.<sup>35</sup> The argument is usually driven by the fact that God is not a biologically sexed male being. Since Father is a male designation among creatures, so the argument goes, it must be a metaphor when predicated of God. This argument greatly diminishes the significance of the name Father by placing it in the same conceptual space as other figurative predication. Some have gone on to suggest that biblical metaphorical imagery of motherhood spoken of God means that the name Mother is interchangeable with

<sup>35</sup> This is the argument of the essays devoted to God and gender language in all three editions of *Discovering Biblical Equality*. See Judy L. Brown, "God, Gender, and Biblical Metaphor" in the first edition (2004), "God, Metaphor, and Gender: Is the God of the Bible a Male Deity?" by R. K. McGregor Wright in the second edition (2005), and Ronald Pierce and Erin Heim, "Biblical Images of God as Mother and Spiritual Formation" in the third edition (2021).

Father, or at least a fitting complement to the masculine name.<sup>36</sup> But this argument fails to account adequately for the nature of analogical language and the distinction between proper and figurative predication as distinct forms of analogical language. Most who argue that Father is a metaphorical name seem to be confusing analogy with metaphor in a way that is foreign to classical Christian accounts of the doctrine of God and inconsistent with biblical language.

As noted above, analogical language entails both similarity and dissimilarity between God and creatures. Thus, with respect to any analogical predication, we must consider how the term communicates truth about God and also what imperfections of creatures must be negated. In the case of the name Father, there is much in the way of similarity between divine and human fatherhood, but there is also much in the way of dissimilarity. One such point of dissimilarity is that God, though properly named Father, is not biologically sexed as male. The acknowledgement of this dissimilarity does not mean that Father is a figurative or metaphorical name, only that it is analogical.

At times, discerning the correct category for some theological predication can be a matter of exegeting many texts and considering many levels of dogmatic entailments from those relevant texts. There are bound to be points of disagreement even between like-minded Christian theologians. In the case of the name Father, however, Scripture gives a clear-cut statement indicating that it is predicated of God properly, that is, that the analogical correspondence runs from God as primary to creatures as secondary. In Ephesians 3:14-15, Paul writes, “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.” The word “family” in v. 15 translates the Greek word *πατριὰ*, which means fatherhood. It is true that this word can be a general designation for the family unit as a whole, but this

<sup>36</sup> Amy Peeler, who seems to collapse all analogical predication into figurative language, says, “God is described as ‘Father,’ or ‘Mother,’ or ‘Rock.’ To think of God as beyond gender in the sense that God encompasses aspects of both genders, that God is Parent or Mother and not only Father, helps to work against the ‘phallacy’ that God is male” (*Women and the Gender of God*, 17). Peeler goes on to acknowledge the prominence of the name Father, especially in NT witness as a name for the first person of the Trinity. Thus, the term cannot simply be replaced or balanced but must be explained. Nevertheless, her commitment to the metaphorical nature of the name does admit degrees of flexibility in Christian divine address in prayer and liturgy. For an extensive list of publications arguing along similar lines for a metaphorical understanding of the name Father, see footnote 17 of Chapter 1 in Peeler’s book.

extension of the meaning of the word only makes sense because of the ubiquitous recognition that it is fitting to name the family in terms of its covenantal head.<sup>37</sup> Paul is stating here that fatherhood in creation (“in heaven and earth”) derives its name from God the Father, to whom Paul and all faithful Christians bow the knee. Bavinck captures the sense well:

This name “Father,” accordingly, is not a metaphor derived from the earth and attributed to God. Exactly the opposite is true: fatherhood on earth is but a distant and vague reflection of the fatherhood of God (Eph. 3:14-15). God is Father in the true and complete sense of the term. . . . He is solely, purely, and totally Father. He is Father alone; he is Father by nature and Father eternally, without beginning or end.<sup>38</sup>

Note that Bavinck is recognizing the direction in which the metaphor runs as distinguishing how one should understand the name or attribution. “Father,” he says, is not “derived from the earth and attributed to God.” The opposite is true. The analog runs from God to creation. Centuries before Bavinck, Aquinas cited Ephesians 3:14-15 as a prime example of the distinction between proper and figurative predication as well.<sup>39</sup> Because the name Father has its origin in God and its analog in creation, it is therefore a proper designation for God rather than a metaphorical or figurative one.

Once the name Father is recognized as a proper designation for God, all biblically based arguments for referring to God as Mother due to the presence of motherly metaphors in Scripture are exposed as fallacious. Motherly and feminine imagery is used in Scripture to describe God and his work in the world, but Mother is never properly predicated of God as a name.

<sup>37</sup> Nearly all the major English translations provide some kind of marginal note pointing out the semantic overlap of the word “father” in v. 14 (πατήρ) and the word translated “family” in v. 15 (πατριὰ). The ESV even suggests “fatherhood” as an alternate translation.

<sup>38</sup> *Reformed Dogmatics*, II:307-8.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas considers whether all divine names are predicated primarily of creatures and only secondarily of God. In customary fashion, he summarizes three arguments that might suggest all language is figurative. He then answers them thus: “On the contrary, It is written, *I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of Whom all paternity in heaven and earth is named* (Eph 3:14-15); and the same applies to the other names applied to God and creatures. Therefore these names are applied primarily to God rather than to creatures” (ST I, q. 13, a. 6. Italics in original).

### *Father as a Personal Divine Name*

The name Father is a designation for God in two distinct ways in Scripture: personal and essential. We have already seen that the name Father is a personal name in that it names one divine person, not in reference to himself but in reference to another, the Son. The classical and biblical Christian doctrine of eternal generation teaches that the Son is truly God. The answer to the questions, “What is the Father?” and “What is the Son?” is the same: God. The deity of the Son just is the deity of the Father. Another way of saying this is that the divine *essence* of the Son just is the divine *essence* of the Father. The only distinction is that the Son’s eternal mode of subsistence is *from the Father* whereas the Father’s eternal mode of subsistence is *from no one*. John refers to Jesus repeatedly as the “only begotten” (μονογενής) as a way of communicating this eternal relation between the Father and the Son (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18).<sup>40</sup> Also, Jesus says, “The Father has life in himself, and he has granted to the Son to have life in himself” (John 5:26). The phrase “life in himself” is a reference to the aseity of God. God is the uncreated possessor of the fullness of eternal life, and he is dependent on no one for that life. This, Jesus says, is the kind of life the Father has in himself, and this is also the kind of life the Son has in himself. The Father has it from no one. The Son has it from the Father. This is the doctrine of eternal generation and fills in the meaning of the personal name of the Father, as well as the personal name of the Son.

The fact that Father is a personal name for the first person of the Trinity, grounded as it is in the biblically revealed doctrine of eternal generation, further cements the argument that Father is a name predicated properly of God. God is a Father eternally as the source of the eternal and uncreated Son. Thus, fatherhood is not a mere human denomination applied primarily to biological males with children. It is the other way around. Biological males are

<sup>40</sup> For a thorough and fascinating essay arguing for the legitimacy of the traditional Christian interpretation of the term *monogenes* as a testimony to eternal generation, see Charles Lee Irons, “A Lexical Defense of the Johannine ‘Only Begotten’ in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, ed. Fred Sanders and Scott Swain (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 98-116.

named father analogically in reference to their children. God is Father first in reference to his only begotten Son.

### *Father as an Essential Divine Name*

It is less common to think about the name Father as an essential name, but it is certainly predicated as such in Scripture. Recall that an essential name is predicated of the divine essence, which is one, and is therefore common to all three persons of the Godhead. Thus, when I say that Father is an essential divine name, I am saying that fatherhood is a divine attribute shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At least three major considerations need to guide our discussion of Father as a divine name.

First, Scripture names God as Father in relation to creation, specifically, in relation to his covenant people. In Deuteronomy 32:6, Moses anticipates a future day of the rebellion of Israel against God. He asks, “Is not he your Father, who created you, who made you and established you?” In Isaiah 64, Isaiah laments the judgment of God on his people and pleads with the Lord to “rend the heavens and come down” (v. 1). In verse eight, he cries out “But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.” The list of examples could continue, but the point is that the name Father sometimes names the relation of God to creatures. It is in this sense that the name Father is an essential name. The relation identified is not with one particular divine person as opposed to the others within the eternal life of God. Rather, the relation is between created covenant partners and the one triune God. The triune God is both Creator and covenant Lord of his people.

Secondly, there are even times that Scripture explicitly speaks of the person of the Son as a Father. The most obvious example is the famed messianic prophecy of Isaiah 9:6: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, *Everlasting Father*, Prince of Peace” (emphasis added). It has been virtually ubiquitous in the Christian tradition to interpret this text as a prophetic foretelling of Jesus. The child born and the Son given is none other than the Lord Jesus, and he is explicitly named “Everlasting Father.” This does not represent a confusion of the

persons of the Father and Son because Father, in this context, is not a personal divine name but an essential divine name. The relation named is the relation between the child, who is the Mighty God, and his people. Thus, it is not a personal divine name. The Son is called Everlasting Father in the same way that he is called Mighty God — essentially.

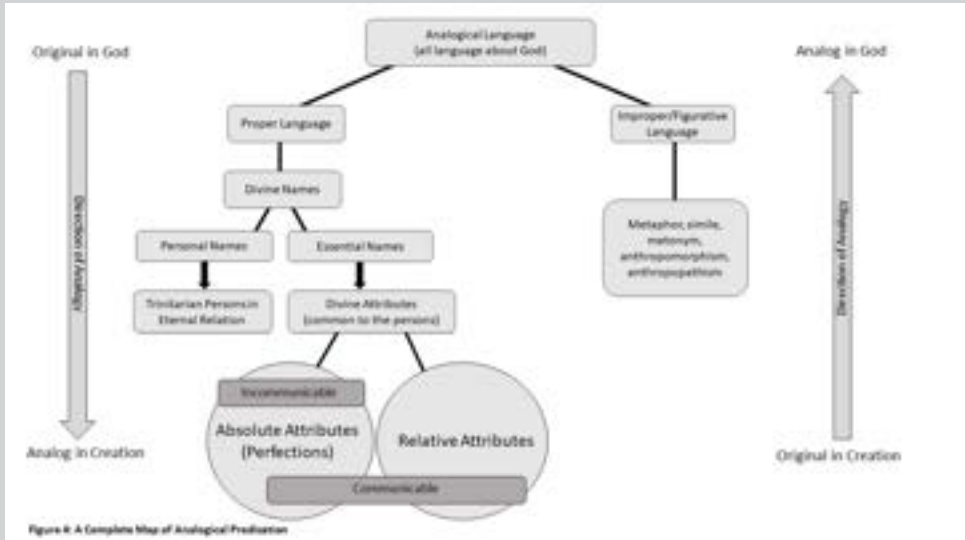
Some might demur that Isaiah 9:6 is not quoted directly in the New Testament. All, however, agree that this prophecy is given with a view to fulfillment of the promises of the Davidic Covenant (see 2 Sam. 7), as the very next verse makes plain. Isaiah 9:7 says, “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, *on the throne of David and over his kingdom*, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this” (emphasis added). There can be no dispute that the New Testament consistently presents the Lord Jesus as the one in whom the promises of the Davidic Covenant find their ultimate fulfillment. Given this fact, it is likely that there are intentional allusions to Isaiah 9:6-7 in the New Testament. Consider the angelic announcement of the birth of Jesus to the Judean shepherds (Luke 2:8-14). They are told that, in the city of David, one who is called Savior, Messiah (Christ), and Lord “is born to you” (v. 11). In anticipation of a future day, Isaiah says, “Unto us” the final Davidic king will be born. On the day of Jesus’s birth, the angel says, “Unto you” this one is born. Furthermore, when the host of angels appear, they declare that the child will bring “peace on earth,” a very likely allusion to “Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6) and “of peace there will be no end” (9:7).

At this point, another distinction in theological language needs to be observed, this one with respect to the attributes of God. All attributes are predicated of all three persons (and thus correspond to essential names), but some attributes are predicated of God in himself, such that these attributes are true of God whether he ever creates a world or not. These attributes are commonly called *absolute attributes* (or divine perfections). Examples include all of the incommunicable attributes (aseity, simplicity, immutability, etc.) as well as some communicable attributes (love, wisdom, knowledge, power, etc.).<sup>41</sup> On the

<sup>41</sup> Among the Reformed Orthodox, it was nearly ubiquitous to refer to attributes by the designations of incommunicable and communicable. An incommunicable attribute is something true of God with no analogical correspondence in creatures. These attributes are always negations of the creaturely limitation or imperfection. A communicable attribute is true of God and, in an analogical way, can also be true of creatures.



other hand some attributes are predicated of God in such a way that they do not name God in himself, but they name the relation between God and creatures. These are often called *relative attributes*, all of which are communicable. See “Figure 4” below for a diagram of the categories of divine attributes in relation to divine names.



The name Father, as an essential name, points out the relative attribute of fatherhood. Every relation between a creature and God is a relation to the divine essence, not to individual divine persons. The real distinctions between the divine persons only pertain within the divine essence, because the relations are not between three beings but between three eternal modes of subsistence of one the one being of God.<sup>42</sup> The relation between God and creatures is a relation between the one divine being (who is eternally three persons) and creation. This truth is usually articulated in terms of the classical doctrine of the inseparable operations of the Trinity. Every external work of God is a work of all three persons of the Trinity, because the power of the operation is the one power of God.<sup>43</sup> It is not the case that the Father has a distinct work or set of works

<sup>42</sup> Some might see the language of “modes of subsistence” and fear that this proposal represents the heresy of modalism. However, the statement made here is the exact opposite of modalism. Modalism teaches that the distinction between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is only external to God, in his revelation. By referring to eternal modes of subsistence of the one divine essence, I am in lockstep with classic orthodox Trinitarian theologians in affirming that the personal relations are eternal, real, and internal to the being of God. The persons are modes of subsistence, not mere modes of manifestation or revelation.

<sup>43</sup> For a further description of the doctrine of inseparable operations, see my article, “What God Hath Done Together: Defending the Historic Doctrine of the Inseparable Operations of the Trinity,” *JETS* 56/4 (2013), 781-800. For a book-length treatment of this classical doctrine, see Adonis Vidu, *The Same God Who Works All Things: Inseparable Operations in Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021).

independent of the Son and Spirit. This would be impossible, because the principle of the external operation is the divine essence common to the three persons. Because creation is a work of God, it is a work of all three persons. Because covenant making is a work of God, it is a work of all three persons. The effect of God's work — in this case creatures and covenant partners — is in relation to the principle of the work, namely the one God. As such, Father is an essential divine name.

#### IV. ANALOGICAL CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN DIVINE AND HUMAN FATHERHOOD

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Thus far, I have argued exegetically and dogmatically that Father is a divine name predicated of God properly, not figuratively. Furthermore, I have argued that Father is a divine name in two ways — personal and essential. As a personal name, Father names the first person of the Trinity in relation to the second. As an essential name, Father names the relation between the triune God and creatures and thus is fittingly predicated of all three divine persons. It remains to be considered how human fatherhood corresponds to divine fatherhood considered personally and essentially.

When contemplating analogical correspondence, we must approach the matter in two distinct ways in order to affirm both the similarity and the dissimilarity involved in the analogical relation. The first approach is what has been called the way of eminence (*via eminentia*) by classical theologians. The way of eminence observes some feature of creation that Scripture says is also true of God, and ascribes appropriate aspects of the creaturely reality to God in a supreme (eminent) way.<sup>44</sup> For example, we observe genuine goodness in creation. When we ascribe goodness to God, we acknowledge that this goodness is in God originally and supremely. The other approach is what has been called the way of negation (*via negativa*) by classical theologians. The way of negation observes some feature of creation that is also true of God, and negates all creaturely limitation and imperfection when contemplating the same truth in God.<sup>45</sup> When we ascribe

<sup>44</sup> Van Mastricht describes the way of eminence as follows: "[W]hatever there is of absolute perfection in creatures we attribute with the highest eminence to the Creator, because of the fact that no one can confer on another what he does not have either formally or eminently, nor can an effect be conceived such that it is on the whole more excellent than its own cause" (*Theoretical Practical Theology*, 56).

<sup>45</sup> Van Mastricht says that, by way of negation, "[W]e entirely remove from him any imperfection that occurs in the creatures, for example, corporality, morality, finitude, and the like" (*Theoretical Practical Theology*, 56).

goodness to God, for example, we negate the imperfections of creaturely goodness. God's goodness does *not* change, is *not* mixed with evil, is *not* an accidental property really distinct from his essence, and so on. We will engage in both of these approaches as we consider the analogical correspondence between God as Father and human fatherhood.

### *Human Fatherhood and Personal Divine Fatherhood*

The personal divine name Father identifies the first person of the Trinity as the source (*principium*) of the second person by way of eternal generation. The analogy in human fatherhood pertains to a human father's biological begetting of a child. In human fatherly begetting, the father begets, and the child is begotten.<sup>46</sup> That is to say, the child is from the father. This is but a shadow of the eminent eternal generation of the Son by the Father in the glorious plenitude of the divine life. Furthermore, a biologically begotten child is by nature what the father is by nature. Human fathers beget human children. This is eminently true of God the Father whose eternal Son exists in "the form of God" and is equal to God (Phil. 2:6). The only-begotten Son of God the Father (John 1:14) is the only-begotten God (John 1:18). By way of eminence, we affirm that the Son of God is the same nature as the Father in the most perfect way.

Of course, human begetting of a child involves creaturely limitations that must be negated of God. Consider the following necessary negations. First, in human begetting, the father is before the child temporally. There was a time when the human father was and the child was not. We must negate any hint of temporal sequence when we speak of God the Son being begotten of God the Father. As long as the Father has been Father, the Son has been Son from him. Thus, generation describes an eternal relation, not a temporal event. Secondly, in human begetting, fathers and their children share an equality of kind. There is a duplication of the nature such that the father and child are two individual beings of the same

<sup>46</sup> While classical languages like Greek and Latin only have one word for the bringing forth of a child, and the word can refer to a father or a mother bringing forth a child, English has a distinct word for the way a father brings forth a child. Fathers beget their children while mothers bear their children. Put differently, children are begotten by their fathers and born of their mothers. This is not to suggest that the distinction between fatherly and motherly biological parenting is the ideological invention of the English-speaking world. In classical languages, the distinction could only be observed by context whereas English recognizes the distinction by explicit terms.

kind of nature. Anyone seeing me and my father standing together would see two men, not one man. In God, we must negate any sense of duplication, because there is only one true and living God. Thus, the begotten Son's nature/essence/being is numerically and identically the same as the nature/essence/being of the Father. As Jesus said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). Thirdly, human generation involves another. Human fathers cannot beget children alone. Human parentage, by God's design, requires both a father and a mother who come together in a sexual union. This is not true of God the Father, who alone is the eternal source of God the Son. There is no heavenly mother. Finally, human fathers are embodied and sexed as male. God the Father is not embodied or sexed, because God is an infinite, invisible, immaterial spirit (John 4:24, 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16).

At this point, one might wonder if Father as a personal name might be interchangeable on some occasions with the gender-neutral Parent or the feminine designation Mother. After all, it could be said positively that human children are from parents/mothers and that they share in the same kind of nature as their parents/mothers. Furthermore, all the negations that apply to human fatherhood would apply to human parenthood or motherhood — temporal sequence, duplication of nature, and the necessity of a partner.

Two responses are in order. First, the fact that the divine name Father is predicated of God *properly*, not figuratively, such that human fatherhood is named *after* God the Father (Eph. 3:14-15) warns us against replacing the revealed name with a name derived from creation. Since mother is not a name given to God anywhere in his own self-disclosure in holy Scripture, we can safely conclude that mother is a name that only has meaning when predicated properly of creatures. Motherly metaphors can fittingly represent God's character in figurative ways (Isa. 13:6-9, 46:3), but motherhood does not derive its name from a divine name. Fatherhood does. Furthermore, the name parent is only meaningful because biological offspring have *both* a mother and a father, something that is not true of God. Secondly, recall that God names himself by his revelation. For creatures to name God by their

own reason and on their own prerogative would imply that creatures have authority over the Creator, given the biblical significance of naming. Since God has revealed the eternal relation between the first and second persons of the Trinity by the names Father and Son, we dare not seek to replace those names with others of our own choosing.

### *Human Fatherhood and Essential Divine Fatherhood*

It is important to observe that not all creatures are called sons of God or children of God. Thus, the essential name Father seems to be naming a relation more precise than merely the Creator-creature relation. That is, the fatherhood of God to creatures seems to be covenantal. God is a Father to Israel (Deut. 32:6, Isa. 64:8), who is God's adopted son (Hos. 11:1). God is a Father to the Davidic kings, who are his adopted sons (2 Sam. 7:14; cf. Psa. 2:7). The Davidic king occupies a unique relation of sonship, which Israel as the covenant people share in by virtue of their identification with the king. In this way, Jesus Christ, who is the eternally begotten Son, is also an adopted Son according to his human nature. He is one Son who has two relations of sonship to God, corresponding to his two respective natures.<sup>47</sup> This may help to explain why both male and female Christians are identified as sons of God. Adopted sonship is a status that is ours by virtue of our union with Christ, who is the king.

Given the covenantal nature of God's relation to his people as a Father (essential name), we can begin to discern how human fatherhood analogically corresponds to essential divine fatherhood. Human fathers are created by God to be the heads of their households, governing, providing for, and protecting the inhabitants of their households. Their children share in their estate as heirs. What belongs to the father belongs to the children. The position of covenant head and Lord is one that God has given to human fathers/

<sup>47</sup> See the way Hebrews 1:5 cites 2 Samuel 7:14 and Psalm 2:7, which clearly refer to the adoptive sonship of the Davidic kings, and applies them to Jesus. Furthermore, Jesus identifies with Israel as God's adopted Son. See the way Matthew 2:15 cites Hosea 11:1, which clearly refers to Israel's exodus from Egypt. This kind of typological fulfillment and identification between Jesus and David/Israel is made possible by the eternal Son's assumption of a human nature. One Son, two sonships is virtually synonymous with the Chalcedonian formula, one person, two natures.

husbands in a particular way, a way not given to mothers/wives (Eph. 5:22-33).

This brief consideration of the analogical correspondence between Father as a divine name and father as a name given to men is not intended to diminish the tremendous value and dignity of motherhood. Women, like men, are created in the image and after the likeness of God. Mothers, in their mothering, carry out the glorious task of image bearing in ways appropriate to their God-given gender and their God-appointed role in their homes. It is vital for God's people to remember that there are ways in which it is appropriate and good for mankind to seek to be like God, and ways that are wicked and evil for mankind to seek to be like God (cf. Gen. 1:26-27 and 3:5). When a human person desires to demonstrate the likeness between God and himself through obedience to divine revelation, this is good. When a human person desires to be like God in ways that undermine the authority of divine revelation, this is serpentine. Acknowledging that only human fathers are like God in fatherly ways is a matter of seeking to bear the image



obediently and faithfully. Mothers can and should be like God in appropriate ways, but the desire to re-name God as Mother would be to reverse the direction of image-bearing, making God after the image of a creature in the very manner suggested by the ancient serpent.

## CONCLUSION

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In an age of gender insanity, muddled thinking and misguided teaching abound regarding the fatherhood of God. Much of the confusion can be mitigated if Christians will pay attention to the modes of discourse by which the Bible speaks about God, heeding the insights of those who have gone before us. Such careful attention will lead to the conclusion that Father is a divine name predicated of God properly, not figuratively. As such, it names God in two ways — personally and essentially — both of which find analogical correspondence in human fatherhood. ✕

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# Godly Home Leaders

## FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

How are you doing as a man? A father? A husband? A friend? What is the state of your family (and if unmarried, then other relationships)? Does your family zealously love Jesus Christ? How do you know? To answer questions like these, we must establish that faithfulness is the goal, not certain results. We cannot be the Holy Spirit in our family's life. We cannot *ensure* certain outcomes when it comes to people. Faithfulness, therefore, is the aim. In preparation for this essay, I sat down and thought about all the Godly Home Leaders (GHLs) I have observed over the years. And I started cataloging things they did that I admired. What made them compelling? And as I did this, I noted that they all did similar things. But I also noted that they all did similar things because of certain beliefs, certain convictions. In what follows, I share five convictions of GHLs, and the fruit that characterizes their lives and families as a result.



## FIRST CONVICTION: THE BIBLE IS TRUE AND PRECIOUS.

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<sup>1</sup> J C Ryle, *Practical Religion* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 122.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Watson, *A Godly Man's Picture* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2003), 62–63.

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul” (Ps. 19:7).

GHLs are life-long learners. These men read the Bible regularly. They know the Word. They are convinced that “a Bible not understood is a Bible that does no good.”<sup>1</sup> They are “into” theology for practical reasons. It is their life. As Thomas Watson explains, “They meditate, delight in, hide it in their hearts, defend it, prefer it, talk about it and conform to it,” because, “A pious soul meditates on the truth and holiness of the Word. He not only has a few transient thoughts, but leaves his mind steeping in the Scripture. By meditation, he sucks from this sweet flower and ruminates on holy truths in his mind.”<sup>2</sup> GHLs are Ezra 7:10 men, “. . . the good hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” They are Psalm 119 men. As David says, “My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times” (v. 20). Or as he adds in verse 97: “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all day.” This all-consuming passion and love for God’s Word characterizes a GHL. Being a GHL starts with a love for the Word. And then this love gets passed on to the family. If we do not love the Word, then we will not be GHLs.

## SECOND CONVICTION: THE LORD IS TO BE FEARED.

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“O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar” (Ps. 139:1–2).

Michael Reeves defines the fear of the Lord this way: “True Fear of God is true love for God defined: it is the right

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*“Being a GHL starts with a love for the Word. And then this love gets passed on to the family. If we do not love the Word, then we will not be GHLs.”*



response to God's full-orbed revelation of himself in all his grace and glory."<sup>3</sup> GHGs are men of integrity who are intentional in being doers of the Word (Ezra wanted to teach it *and do it*). This is important to GHGs — they are *trustworthy* men. This is where so many fail in our day and age. Everyone wants to be a talker, a teacher, an influencer, but not a doer. The world may be impressed with talkers, but our families will not be. Our kids will not be. If we fail to do the Word, then we are teaching our family that the Bible is not true and that God does not exist. We must be doers of the Word. James 1:22 reminds us, "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." Our Scripture study needs to conform us — not just inform us. The goal is change, to be men of action. The family will not follow if we are not doers of the Word. We can listen all day, talk all day, but the family will know if we obey the Word or not. If we do not obey the Word, then we cannot expect our families to respect our leadership or follow us — they will not trust us.

To be a doer of the Word is to be a man of integrity. GHGs are the same person at home as they are at church or in the office. Some occasions call for different approaches, but they are the same person everywhere. What you see is what you get. Their life is above board — they live in the

<sup>3</sup> Michael Reeves, *Rejoice and Tremble: The Surprising Good News of the Fear of the Lord* (Union Series) (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 53.

light. They are not afraid of being exposed because there is nothing to expose. There are no skeletons in their closet. GHs do the right thing because it pleases their king, come what may. They do not fear their wife or children. They do not fear their boss or friends. GHs *fear* the Lord, which results in being *fearless* and courageous.

### **THIRD CONVICTION: SIN REQUIRES A SAVIOR.**

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“For all have fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

Because they have experienced salvation, GHs love the Lord from the heart. The Bible teaches that the heart is the control center of our lives, dealing with our thoughts, beliefs, desires, and goals. Knowing this, GHs seek to conform each of those areas to the Lord. They are faithful in using the means of grace to align their soul with the Lord’s. They understand you cannot pass on what you do not have. They forgive because they have been forgiven (Col. 3:13). As recipients of grace, they are grace conduits and are gracious in the home, gracious with their wives and gracious with their children (Col. 3:19, 21). GHs are leaders in grace. Their homes are filled with grace — they are the first to ask forgiveness and the first to grant it. GHs own up when they are wrong. They ask their wives for forgiveness when necessary. The same is true with their children. Few things will embitter a wife against her husband, or children against their father, more than when he fails to ask for forgiveness when he has sinned against them.

### **FOURTH CONVICTION: MARRIAGE IS PRIORITIZED.**

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“In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church” (Eph. 5:28-29).

GHs have great marriages. They honor their wives before their kids — they look for ways to do this and revel in it. GHs create an environment where the children know and understand that disrespect towards their mother will not be tolerated. GHs give their wives the guidance, support, and tools she needs to help her flourish in her role as wife and mother. They date their wives and let them know they

are special. One of the best things fathers can do for their children is to love their wives well. If we want our sons to desire to be family men, then we had better model joy in the home. If we want our sons to nourish and cherish their wives and serve the Lord together one day, then we had better give our wives some time and have fun with them. Why do people in our day and age despise marriage and commitment? Sure, Satan is attacking the family, and there are cultural pressures against God's design for the family. But for too many, the home is a drag, and the marriages are dull. The home is not compelling. The GHs primary human relationship is his wife and he enjoys her.

#### **FIFTH CONVICTION: FAMILY CULTURE MUST BE CULTIVATED.**

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"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (Deut. 6:5-7).

GHs are able to get the whole family to buy into the family. They create a sacrificial culture in which serving one another is a dutiful delight, in which they set the tone by being a servant leader in the home. They create a culture of praise and worship and awe of the Lord, his majesty, and his majestic works. They create a culture of creativity, one in which the family does not merely consume entertainment, but is active and productive. To develop such a culture requires lots of time and intentional training: time together and *intentionality* in that time. Being distracted is a home killer. GHs are not distracted — they have their finger on the pulse of the family and are spending themselves for the growth of each family member under their care.

#### **CONCLUSION**

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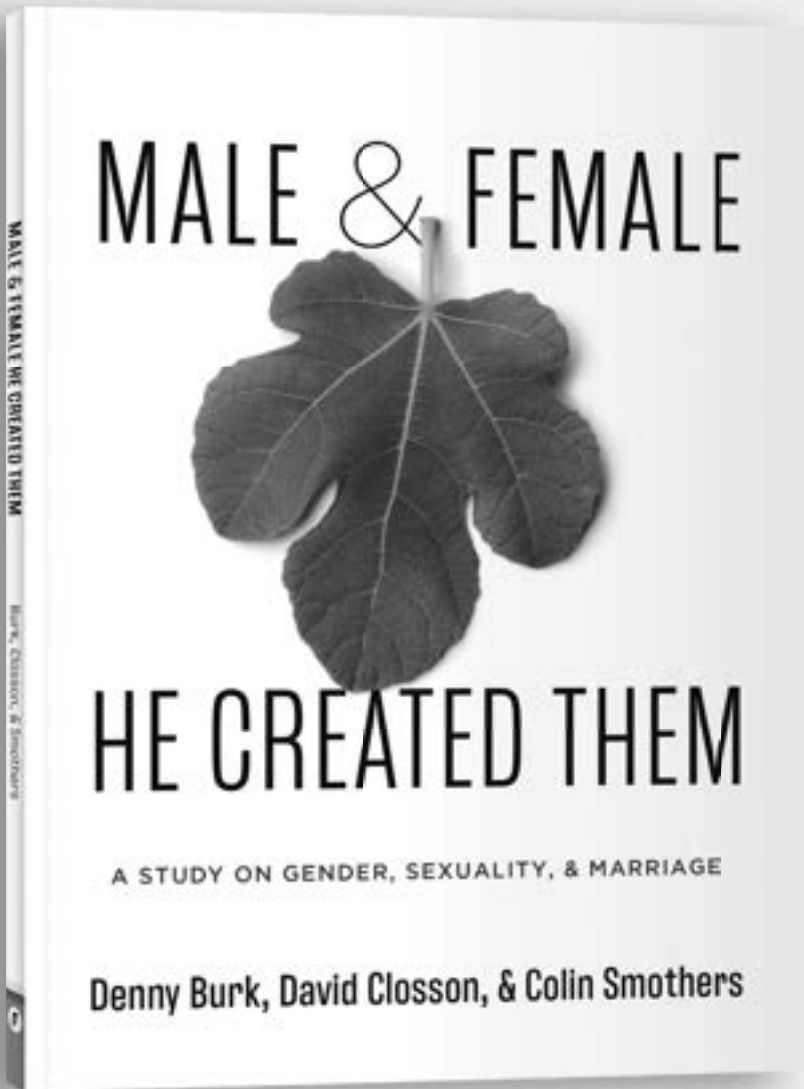
In order to be a GH, we must have convictions and live out those convictions. If we do not measure up in certain areas of life, then we need to repent and change course, knowing that it is the kindness of the Lord that leads men

to repentance (Rom. 2:4). Let us hold each other to a high standard and encourage one another in love, reveling in Christ, the only one to have perfectly lived out his convictions. May we be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong, and let all that we do be done in love (1 Cor. 16:13). ✕



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# *Half the Battle: A Review of Nancy Pearcey's The Toxic War on Masculinity*

Nancy Pearcey's new book defends true masculinity from its most recent critics. The toxicity, as she sees it, is not masculinity itself, but rather the *war on* masculinity. Pearcey attempts to clear conservative Christians, including evangelicals, from accusations that their theology leads to abuse. She sets forth a compelling counter-narrative, showing that those conservative evangelicals who regularly attend church actually have the lowest rates of domestic abuse or divorce and report the most happiness and relational satisfaction. Pearcey also identifies what she sees as unhelpful distortions of masculinity. Various culprits like the Industrial Revolution, Victorian sentimentality, and Feminism are held out as creating conditions or



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



ideas which undermined true biblical masculinity. As a corrective to these, Pearcey points to what she calls “the Good Man” and calls both men and women to appreciate his virtue.

*The Toxic War on Masculinity* defends the natural goodness of the distinctions between the sexes and maintains that God has given headship to the man. Pearcey argues from a biblical perspective, and she seeks to defend what she understands to be the best part of the historic Christian tradition and even the recent evangelical legacy. At the same time, *The Toxic War on Masculinity* does also criticize “traditional” gender arguments, especially the notion that men are more naturally wild or inclined towards sin and that women should play the role of reformer. More than this, though, there are pronounced egalitarian elements in Pearcey’s argument, and it is not clear that her own views are entirely settled or consistent. As such, *The Toxic War on Masculinity* occupies a sort of middle position in current debates over gender roles. While there is much to applaud about the book, it has some notable weaknesses. Some of the book’s inconsistencies might in fact highlight larger tensions among complementarian evangelicals today. Because of this, Pearcey’s work deserves a close look, both for what it gets right and for what it gets wrong.

## REVIEW

*The Toxic War on Masculinity* is divided into three main sections, with an introduction and epilogue serving as bookends. The introduction lays out what Pearcey sees as our big contemporary problem, a distorted and abusive masculinity which

has then created antagonism against masculinity itself. As a corrective, she believes we ought to rediscover “a healthy, biblical concept of masculinity . . . the god-given pattern for manhood” (14). This is the book’s primary thesis: there is a good original form of masculinity, the true essence of masculinity, and there is a masculinity distorted by sin that leads to abuse. Pearcey calls the first of these the “Good Man,” a true masculinity characterized by virtues like “honor, duty, integrity, [and] sacrifice,” and duties like “stand[ing] up for the little guy” and being “responsible” and “generous” (19). The distorted masculinity is referred to as the “Real’ Man” (notice that “real” is being used rhetorically). This “Real” Man is tough, strong, competitive, stoic, and strives for dominance (19). Pearcey argues that we ought to reject the “Real” Man ideal, but that we should do so without rejecting masculinity. In fact, she believes the answer to the “Real” Man is the Good Man. By embracing and promoting the Good Man, we will overcome both toxic masculinity and the war on masculinity.

From here, Pearcey moves into her first main section, the positive portrayal of Christian men. In what is perhaps the most important part of the book, she counters recent criticisms of conservative evangelical views on sex and marriage with statistical analysis. Commenting on the work of researcher Brad Wilcox, Pearcey writes, “Research has found that evangelical Protestant men who attend church regularly are the least likely of any group in America to commit domestic violence” (37). Later, she quotes Wilcox directly, “It turns out that the happiest of all wives in America are religious conservatives . . . Fully 73 percent of wives who hold

conservative gender values and attend religious services regularly with their husbands have high-quality marriages” (39). These striking observations will likely surprise most readers.

Pearcey follows this chapter up with another attempt to bolster her presentation of the Good Man, arguing that most conservative Christian marriages do not have a patriarchal arrangement but rather exhibit high degrees of respect and mutuality. This section is marked by various complementarian spokesmen explaining how headship does not mean domination, that true leadership is service, and that husband and wife exist in an “equal partnership” (51). This too is presented as surprising good news. But Pearcey also begins to work egalitarian arguments into this chapter. One is a direct quote from Carrie Miles: “In the New Testament, no one is ever directed to actively ‘subject’ (rule) anyone else” (54). For Pearcey, “headship” means that the man should “take the lead,” by which she means that he should take responsibility for his wife and family (56). She rejects any notion of superiority in headship and even argues that its true meaning is “source” (57). This will be a familiar argument to longtime participants in

complementarian debates, but it has historically been the argument made by critics of complementarianism. Pearcey calls this category of men “soft patriarchs” who “use progressive means (‘encouraging men to be more engaged and affectionate with their families’) in the service of traditional ends (‘to shore up the family as an institution’)” (59). That line also serves as a succinct summary of Pearcey’s larger concept of the Good Man, the version of masculinity which she sees as the solution. He ought to use progressive means to achieve traditional ends.

Pearcey’s second main section turns towards history. Having explained and illustrated the Good Man, she wants to show how he got lost. The earliest periods of American history, she argues, retained the positive virtues of following God’s call to take care of others. In Puritan America, men assumed the lead in piety and religion. They did so with a notion of “the common good,” which meant that they were responsible for the protection and development of others (76). Their home life and work life were largely integrated, and so “when colonists called on husbands and fathers to exercise authority in the family, what they meant was that men were to deny their personal ambition and pursue the common good of the family as a whole” (77).

This arrangement began to change with the Industrial Revolution. Pearcey places a significant amount of explanatory power on the Industrial Revolution’s effect on the home. It separated one’s work from the rest of his living, severing the relationship between production and the family. As a result, men’s energies were largely focused upon their work, which was away from



the family. They were not “at home” but rather “at their job.” Women, by contrast, experienced a change in what “working at home” meant. No longer was home the center of a joint hub of production. Instead, it became largely private, mostly concerned with cooking, cleaning, and some childcare. Pearcey even finds the origins of secularism here, arguing that men began to see this new professional and “public” realm as “objective” and “neutral,” whereas the home continued to operate on “biblical standards” (96). For masculinity as a concept, a similar division arose. The public man operated according to the laws of the workplace, whereas biblical guidance was relegated to the home.

Pearcey’s next historical section deals with the various reactions to the new modern industrialized arrangement. Ideologies associated with romanticism and then Victorianism began to identify the home as a sort of “haven” away from the largely harsh and dehumanizing modern world. The home was characterized by more traditional morality, but it was also seen as a female domain. Thus, women began to be seen as moral guardians and even social reformers. Instead of the older chauvinism, which portrayed women as particularly depraved and in need of taming (111), the woman was now cast as morally superior (109). She was the one who needed to reform and civilize the man. Pearcey writes, “In the nineteenth century, society began accepting the idea that men are naturally prone to sin and self-centeredness, while at the same time giving women the responsibility to hold them in check” (113).

This “woman as Reformer” model has endured and often today appears as an articulation of what might seem to be



traditionalism. Pearcey points to George Gilder as one contemporary example:

In Gilder’s view, “the woman’s morality is the ultimate basis for all morality” — and men must learn it from women: “The success or failure of civilized society depends on how well the women can transmit these values to the men...The community is largely what she is and what she demands in men” (168).

Gilder’s work has recently been republished by the ultra-conservative Canon Press of Moscow, Idaho, and so many understandably interpret him as criticizing the slide away from traditional masculinity. But as Pearcey shows, Gilder’s view is itself anti-masculine and substantially the same as one of the views that played an historical part in masculinity’s decline. This line of argument is also one of *The Toxic War on Masculinity’s* most insightful.

The historical narrative next moves through both Romantic and Darwinian concepts of nature. The Romantics sought to return to nature, whereas the Darwinians understand nature to be a constant state of conflict and evolution. But both used a common sort of “primitivism” in their understanding of

nature. And with their understanding of nature came a similar understanding of humanity. The Romantics often wanted to find a new way of masculine life in the sort of noble savage myth, usually an individual man getting “back to nature,” by living off the land, in the wilderness, or on the frontier. The Darwinians, by contrast, focused on the less-than-noble savage, the sort of man who conquered nature by means of power and domination. For its part, the church responded to both movements in both affirmative and critical ways. Movements like muscular Christianity and the Social Gospel exhibit appreciation for the natural world and a godly form of stewardship. But they also exalt strength, competition, and even martial dominance.

This large historical section concludes with a look at fatherhood. The separation of home and work, combined with the notion of men as brutes in need of civilization, has now led to our contemporary notion of men as *the* problem. Because of their frequent absence from their children’s lives, fathers came to be seen as unnecessary (191). Worse still, they eventually came to be seen as incompetent and embarrassing (192). This is especially unfortunate, Pearcey argues, because it creates a debilitating generational cycle: “The key to developing a positive masculinity is a boy’s close, loving relationship with his father” (192). She concludes this section with a call for men to become fathers and to assert a godly masculinity in the life of their family. This can best be achieved by reintegrating work and home, and Pearcey suggests creating “more flexible hours through telecommuting, videoconferencing, job sharing, staggered hours, time shifting (recording a meeting to be viewed later), and proportional benefits for part-time

work, such as health insurance and pension contributions” (215).

The third section of the book focuses on the role of abuse. Pearcey included a confession of her own history with an abusive father in the very opening pages of the book. She is very aware of the destructive impact of abusive fathers. Here she gives the topic a closer look. Pearcey argues that domestic abuse is primarily a male problem. Interacting with the work of John Gottman, she writes, “The health of a marriage depends primarily on the husband” (231). She states that Gottman’s research “concludes that husbands’ disrespect for their wives is the major cause of marital instability” (231). She then moves on to a more detailed look at physical abuse and the disproportionate way that fear and pain affect women. “Females are biologically programmed to experience fear more than males,” she writes, and “women suffer quite a bit more physical pain than males” (235). With men’s greater strength, aggression, and endurance comes the potential for greater abuse. This then also implies their greater responsibility for the harmony and wellbeing of their family.

This section concludes with a discussion of how Christians should respond to domestic abuse. Pearcey cautions against defaulting to a supposed even-handed approach that would place culpability on both parties. The abuser, most often the man (in this chapter), bears the brunt. She argues for a broader understanding of abuse, including both verbal and physical abuse (250). And she suggests that wives should not submit to abusive husbands (257). Pearcey makes the very perceptive observation that abusers will often also cast themselves as victims (253). Pastors and elders, then,

must be careful not to accept justifications which are based on perceived victimhood. She argues that hard consequences must be put into place to correct abuse. Wives are not to remain passive but should find ways to confront abusive husbands. Unfortunately, some sorts of people might not ever change, and Pearcey believes that, in such cases, the abused party must seek healing for themselves, reclaim their own mission, and create important boundaries (267). Though she does not explicitly offer counsel for when and how to divorce, its permissibility is assumed and a somewhat broad perspective is suggested (259).

## RESPONSE

There's much to like about *The Toxic War on Masculinity*. It defends traditional notions of gender and sexuality. Men and women are different and their differences are good. Pearcey argues from a biblical perspective and seeks to defend what she understands as the best part of the historic Christian and even recent evangelical legacy. The strongest parts of the book are the righting of errant assumptions about abuse among conservative and evangelical men and husbands, the case for better integration of work and home, and the criticism of the "woman as reformist" view which portrays men as naturally more depraved than women and in need of taming or civilizing by them. Each of these are extremely important contributions and could easily be made into stand alone book projects.

Regrettably, the book's weaknesses really are significant. Pearcey's treatment of history is broad, often engaging in a sort of "big idea" summary of long and complex passages of time. The Industrial Revolution was certainly disruptive, but

its boundaries are not made clear and its causal links are never truly demonstrated. In one place, Pearcey points to *Rip Van Winkle* as an example of the trope of the henpecked husband who must escape from the home (146). This appears several sections after the Industrial Revolution is discussed, and the natural assumption would be that this shows a masculine reaction to the various social and psychological disruptions it caused. But *Rip Van Winkle* was published in 1819, and it is set in a pre-industrial New York village. It seems more likely that Rip is a fairly timeless symbol. Pearcey's treatment of "the Victorians" is similarly sloppy. She describes the Victorian religious aesthetic as "soft and sentimentalized" (115). But later in the book, when she describes "muscular Christianity," the three military-themed hymns she gives as examples (179) are all written by Victorians!

More significantly, despite its title, the book does not really engage with the most recent controversies concerning sex and gender roles in evangelical churches. There is a moderate discussion of MeToo, but there are no references to Kristin Du Mez. Amazingly, neither John Piper nor Mark Driscoll show up. Sheila Ray Gregorie is footnoted once, as a secondary witness affirming the work of John Gottman. The so-called "manosphere" or "red pill" outlook is treated very briefly and without any serious discussion of its main points of contention. Jordan Peterson is discussed once and briefly. Aaron Renn is footnoted once, but not for his discussions of complementarianism or patriarchy. No mention is made of names like Joe Rogan, Jocko Willink, or even Andrew Tate. Thinkers who have contributed more academic accounts of masculinity, such

as Harvey Mansfield (*Manliness*), Steven Goldberg (*Why Men Rule*), and Anthony Esolen (*No Apologies: Why Civilization Depends on the Strength of Men*) are likewise absent. Huge parts of the current cultural conversation are simply absent from Pearcey's work.

Finally, it is not actually clear whether Pearcey is a complementarian or an egalitarian. An initial reading would suggest that her thesis is complementarian. She argues that men and women are different and their differences are good. She is clear that "the two sexes need each other to fulfill their mission" (30). She acknowledges that there are biological and psychological differences between men and women, and she even maintains that women have a stronger tendency towards caretaking and domestic life (31). So far, so complementarian. But Pearcey also employs many egalitarian scholars and Bible commentators, and she makes several classic egalitarian arguments [her definitions of head (57) and helper (81-82) and her rejection that the husband should "rule" over his wife (54)]. She denies any notion of sexual hierarchy, instead emphasizing equality (54). And yet, when it comes time to discuss matters like abuse, the male's possession of greater strength and aggression and the woman's greater sensitivity towards pain and fear all become very relevant. This is a tension worth thinking more about.

Pearcey affirms that men have "greater power" (84) and that women have "less power" (83). She even states that this "power differential . . . is rooted in biology" (84). Is this different from it being rooted in creation? If not, then isn't this an admission of a sort of biblical patriarchy?

If a man's greater strength and greater ability to resist fear can serve as reasons for him to bear greater responsibility, and if these are things that need "moral and ethical constraints" (84), then is this not a sort of sexual hierarchy, only viewed from the negative point of view? Could we not look at the inverse and suggest that male superiority in these areas is relevant to his headship? His greater power and strength and the fact that he experiences less fear (235) could be understood to have positive uses. His disparity in these areas might be by design, precisely so that he can be an effective godly leader.

In Pearcey's telling, the reality of a power hierarchy between the sexes only comes up in the areas where men are instructed to take more responsibility, to exercise greater self-discipline, and to understand the viewpoints of others. When positive descriptions and duties are in view, then equality is always what is extolled. This is a blind spot in Pearcey's argument, and it's a point made by a few of those writers and thinkers with whom she did not consult. At the end of the day, this is still largely a message that emphasizes the need for men to restrain themselves and limit their potential. It is not so fundamentally different from those earlier presentations of the wild man needing reform. He is still domesticated without any adequate description of how this is a perfection of his nature.

At the beginning of *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, Pearcey offered two "scripts" for masculinity, the Good Man and the "Real" Man. Instead of suggesting that the cure for "Real" Man is his becoming the Good Man, it would be better to demonstrate that the vices of the "Real"

*“it would be better to demonstrate that the vices of the ‘Real’ Man could all become virtues if pointed in the right direction”*

Man could all become virtues if pointed in the right direction. Pearcey admits as much, “It’s not that every trait listed as the ‘Real’ Man is necessarily bad. In a crisis, for example, we need men (and women) who can stand tough and not collapse in tears” (19). But she needed to devote time to demonstrating the potential virtue of masculine strength and even competitiveness. “Rule” should not be considered a bad thing. After all, God rules over us. Even the quest for glory is essentially good. Young men find glory in their strength, and old men find it in the gray hair of wisdom (Prov. 20:29). Kings find glory in the searching out of secret things (Prov. 25:2). Husbands find glory in their wives (1 Cor. 11:7). And Christ finds glory in his church. Yes, he finds glory in sacrificing for the church. But he also finds glory in presenting the church to himself (Eph. 5:27).

#### CONCLUSION

*The Toxic War on Masculinity* fights a good fight, but it only goes about halfway. Its strong points are important, and complementarians should take notice. But its weaknesses must also be noticed. And

they should be noticed as weaknesses that have occasionally been present within the common complementarian discourse itself. In overcoming these weaknesses, we can, by God’s grace, help to form “Real” Good Men. ✕

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REVIEWED BY DENNY R. BURK

# *Should We Call God Mother?* *A Review of Amy Peeler's* *Women and the Gender of God*

*Denny R. Burk is President of The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and Editor-in-Chief of Eikon.*

Feminist theologians have long wrestled with the question of God's gender. In particular, they have chafed against naming God as "Father" and even against Jesus' incarnation in a male body. As Mary Daly famously wrote, "If God is male, then the male is God." Therefore, the business of women's liberation involves freeing women from patriarchal notions of God. Daly complained that "The divine patriarch castrates women as long as he is allowed to live on in the human imagination." For that reason, Daly argued, people's masculine conception of God needs to be castrated. There needs to be a "cutting away the Supreme Phallus."<sup>1</sup>

Daly and other feminist theologians view the Fatherhood of God and the maleness of Jesus as fixtures in an oppressive patriarchy designed to subjugate women. Their aim, therefore, has been to rewrite orthodoxy so as to remove all vestiges of patriarchy. That

revision includes how we name God and how we think about the incarnation itself. By and large, evangelicals have been consistent opponents of this program and have insisted on affirming the authority of Scripture, orthodox Trinitarianism, and orthodox Christology. Nevertheless, within evangelicalism, egalitarians have staked-out a kind of theological no-man's land. On the one hand, they wish to affirm the authority of Scripture and the integrity of the Christian tradition. But on the other hand, they also wish to take on board some of the feminist critiques of "patriarchal" religion. For the most part, this has led to innovative reinterpretations of biblical texts (e.g. 1 Tim. 2:12, 1 Cor. 11:3, and 14:34-35) while affirming inerrancy, Nicene trinitarianism, and Chalcedonian Christology.

A new book by egalitarian Wheaton College professor Amy Peeler, however,

<sup>1</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), 19.



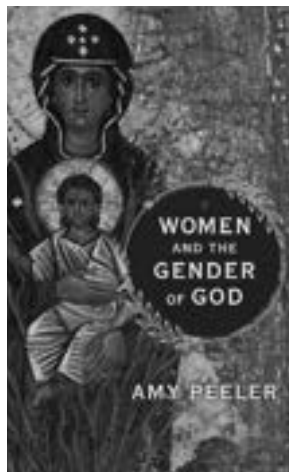
takes a different approach. In *Women and the Gender of God* (Eerdmans, 2022), Peeler makes an egalitarian case that sits in tension with both Nicea and Chalcedon. Her basic contention is uncomplicated and uncontroversial: *God is not male*. From that observation, however, she extrapolates a number of other points that are controversial — including elements that implicate trinitarianism, Christology, and the ordination of women.

## AN OVERVIEW

In the “Introduction,” Peeler contends that Christianity has failed women by its toleration of misogyny, much of which is due to “an underlying belief that God is male” (2). Even though many conservative Christians deny that God is male, their denial is contradicted by their “tight grip on the male-like masculinity of God” (3). She aims to break that grip by showing that God the Father is not male and that God the Son is male like no other (4). She plans to demonstrate this by careful exegesis of biblical texts about Mary and the incarnation.

In chapter 1, “The Father Who Is Not Male,” Peeler argues that even though the Bible uses masculine language to describe God (e.g., “Father”), God is not male. The accounts in Matthew and Luke about Mary’s conception are clearly not sexualized (19), nor is there any notion of “divine rape” in the narratives (25). Moreover, masculine language for God (though predominant) does not exhaust the scriptural witness (16-17). “Parent” or “Mother” are equally faithful ways of referring to the first person on the Trinity (17).

In chapter 2, “Holiness and the Female



Amy Peeler. *Women and the Gender of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022.

Body,” Peeler argues that Jesus’s conception in a female body implies “a radical affirmation concerning the female body’s proximity to holiness” (33). The belief by many in the ancient world that birth is something shameful or dirty reflects a “deep-seated pancultural misogyny” (58). On the contrary, Christianity teaches that Jesus’ presence in Mary’s womb “prohibits any despising of the female body” (59). Indeed in the incarnation, God has deemed the female body “worthy to handle the most sacred of all things, the very body of God” (61).

In chapter 3, “Honor and Agency,” Peeler contends that even though Mary calls herself the “slave of the Lord” (77), God has not transgressed Mary’s agency as an individual. God did not play the role of a coercive male, nor did Mary play the part of a “coerced female” (65).

In chapter 4, “God Is Not Masculine,” Peeler argues against the “insidious” notion “that

males are more like God” (89). She dings John Piper’s contention that Christianity has a “masculine feel” and suggests that Piper’s view requires a belief that men bear God’s image more clearly than women do (89). Peeler argues on the contrary that neither God nor Christianity itself is masculine. Divine initiative and authority are not masculine traits (107). Even though we may privilege masculine language for God (like “Father”), that language is not the only way to speak of him nor does that language in any way suggest that God himself is masculine.

In chapter 5, “The Male Savior,” Peeler argues against the belief that—since Jesus is male—only males can represent Jesus. This argument has particular relevance to sacramental traditions (like Catholicism) in which clergy must be male in order to faithfully represent Christ (118-19). Peeler concedes that Jesus is male but also that he is a “male who became embodied like no other” (121). Because there was no male involved in Jesus’ conception, his flesh derives from female flesh alone (132). He is able to save both male and female sinners because he himself is male and has “female-provided flesh” (137). Peeler writes, “the inclusion of male and female in the body of the incarnate Lord provides the Christological justification for rejecting an exclusive maleness in God” (139). It also “eliminates the maleness of Jesus as support for a male-only clergy” (145).

In chapter 6, “Ministry,” Peeler provides an exposition of all the New Testament texts dealing with Mary and shows that Mary’s contribution was not just her womb but also her proclamation. Mary’s life and ministry show that “the God of the New Testament does not silence the verbal ministry of

women” (153). This chapter is followed by a brief “Conclusion” and an extended appendix arguing that God is a good Father, not a threatening or oppressive one (223).

Peeler’s basic contention in this book is completely sound: *God is not male*. All of the orthodox believe this—including those who have different views than Peeler on women’s ordination. She also argues clearly in favor of the virgin birth. To the degree that Peeler demonstrates all of this from the Bible, that is all to the good. Nevertheless, her various extrapolations do contain within them some significant problems, and it is to those problems that we now turn.

#### PROBLEMS WITH DEFINING TERMS

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Peeler’s argument is undermined by her failure to define crucial terms. And yet she uses these terms throughout the project. She never explains, for example, the difference between male vs. masculine, female vs. feminine, or sex vs. gender. This leaves the reader with his feet firmly planted in mid-air. Perhaps we can assume that the terms *male* and *female* refer to sexed bodies. But can we assume the same about the terms *masculine* and *feminine*?

Clearly, many writers use the terms *masculine* and *feminine* to refer to non-sexual characteristics, such as when someone says, “That room is decorated in a masculine way.” That use of the term masculine does not signify a sexual reality but a kind of stereotype. Could it be that some of the writers that Peeler criticizes are likewise not using masculine terms to indicate that God has a sexed body? To censure those writers before coming to terms with those writers is not helpful.

These kinds of terms must be defined clearly before a project like this can succeed.

This weakness really comes to the fore in chapter 4 where Peeler has moved from her contention that God is not male (chapter 1) to a further contention that God is not *masculine*. In contending that God is not masculine, is that just another way of saying that God doesn't have a sexed body? Or does she mean that God does not act in stereotypically masculine ways? She doesn't tell us. Nor does she tell us what she means by *gender* — a term that for many readers denotes a social role or relation without any necessary connection to a particular sexed body. When Peeler says that “God the Father is indeed beyond gender” (142), does she mean that God does not have a body, or does she mean that God does not act in stereotypically masculine ways? None of this is clear because she doesn't define her terms.

To make matters even more confusing, Peeler cites Judith Butler's work favorably, arguing that “Judith Butler's work has — beneficially in my opinion — unsettled a neat bifurcation between sex and gender” (5). Beneficially? Judith Butler is a postmodern feminist whose work erases the distinction between sex and gender by arguing that both sex and gender are socially constructed. How can any Christian view this as beneficial? Does Peeler agree with Butler that both gender and sex are social constructs? All of this ambiguity makes Peeler's argument really confusing and hobbles the overall project.

#### PROBLEMS WITH THEOLOGY PROPER

Peeler's egalitarianism is the tail wagging the dog in this book. Her egalitarianism at

times seems to overdetermine her doctrine of God. For example, in chapter 4 “God Is Not Masculine,” she argues against the widely held notion that God's *initiative* and *leading* are masculine characteristics. She believes that view is based on a traditional view of gender roles, which she rejects outright because “Not all the faithful interpret the biblical text to demand that only men should lead. Hence to demand that God's sovereign initiation be described as masculine is to assume a consensus that does not exist” (106). Notice that her egalitarianism drives her understanding of the Bible's masculine expressions about God. Indeed, her egalitarianism rules out *a priori* that God could act in a stereotypically masculine way.

Peeler claims that treating *initiative* and *leadership* as masculine traits unleashes “heretical theology” and “blasphemy” (106). It portrays God “as an aggressive sexual human male” (107). She claims that “Rape by a man is the only time when initiation must be from the male,” for women may initiate and lead anywhere they please, including in sexual relationships (107). Indeed, even heterosexual intercourse may be seen as a form of female domination, “as the woman enveloping the man” (107). In her view, the Bible teaches egalitarian gender roles and therefore does not depict leading and *initiating* as *masculine* stereotypes.

In short, Peeler wants to “affirm the triune God's supremacy without calling that masculinity” (107). Anyone who does call it masculinity is trading in heresy and blasphemy. This is an astonishing accusation given that two of her examples of this error are C. S. Lewis and John Frame (105). But Peeler has overplayed

her hand at this point, and part of it is due again to her failure to define her terms. She never really defines what she means by “masculine” (or “feminine” for that matter). Nevertheless, she seems to assume that calling God “masculine” amounts to a “crude male sexualization of God” (107). But that is not what C. S. Lewis or John Frame mean when they refer to God with masculine language. Lewis, Frame, and all the orthodox recognize that God does not have a body and is not a sexual being. But they also recognize that God’s Fatherhood is prior to and gives rise to creaturely Fatherhood (Eph. 3:14). Herman Bavinck says it this way:

This name “Father,” accordingly, is not a metaphor derived from the earth and attributed to God. Exactly the opposite is true: fatherhood on earth is but a distant and vague reflection of the fatherhood of God (Eph. 3:14-15). God is Father in the true and complete sense of the term... He is solely, purely, and totally Father. He is Father alone; he is Father by nature and Father eternally, without beginning or end (*Reformed Dogmatics*, II:307-308).

When Christians like Lewis or Frame describe God in masculine terms, they aren’t saying that God has a sexual body. Indeed, they reject that notion outright. They are simply recognizing that God’s non-sexual nature is truly imaged in creaturely masculinity, especially his Lordship and Kingship and, yes, his Fatherhood. This observation doesn’t deny that God is also imaged in certain feminine characteristics. Certainly, He is, for women are equally created in God’s image. It is simply an attempt to explain why Scripture by and

large makes use of masculine expressions for God.

One need not agree with this way of putting things to recognize that it is probably the majority view of the orthodox over the long history of the church. Indeed, even Peeler acknowledges that the view can be found “in each of the major branches of the Christian church” (103). For that reason alone, she ought to exercise more caution before making the view tantamount to rape and blasphemy.

#### **PROBLEMS WITH MASCULINE LANGUAGE FOR GOD**

Peeler acknowledges “that it is both right and good to call God ‘Father’” (109). Nevertheless, she sees many serious problems with paternal language for God (109). Indeed, she throws a penalty flag against the Bible’s “unrelenting masculine language for God” and sometimes makes use of the gender-neutral “Godself” instead of the Bible’s “himself” to refer to God (5, 190). She favors thinking of God as “beyond gender” and as encompassing aspects of “both genders” (17). She says that thinking of God as “Parent” or “Mother” and “not only Father, helps to work against the ‘phallacy’ that God is male” (17). For this reason, she is very much open to addressing the triune God with terms other than Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. On this point, it will probably be most useful to quote her at length:

As the tradition has envisioned the eternal begetting of the Son, it has deemed both fatherly and motherly language and processes as fitting descriptions of a mystery no human language could ever fully describe (99).

Hence, exclusive use of paternal language for God cannot be justified on what Scripture and the ancient and widespread theological tradition point to concerning the eternally begotten relationship in God. Addressing the personal and eternal divine source of the Son as “Parent” rather than “Father” may more correctly name this relationship (101).

In full alignment with the biblical text, God may be called upon metaphorically as Father just as God may be addressed metaphorically as Mother (102).

Neither the doctrine of creation nor the Trinity nor salvation necessitate exclusively masculine paternal language for the first person. In fact, they all prohibit it (103).

Thankfully, Peeler does not rule out the propriety of masculine language for God. Indeed, she says that we should “privilege” paternal language for God (112). Nevertheless, she argues that the Bible prohibits the *exclusive* use of such language. I don’t know how else to read this except that she believes that we *must* use both gender-neutral and feminine expressions to speak of God, at least sometimes. After all, “Mother” is just as biblical as “Father” (102).<sup>2</sup>

This approach to the naming of God is fundamentally flawed. Peeler denies that

eternal generation is the primary grounds for naming God as Father (114). She rejects that God’s eternal “nature” determines His self-disclosure as Father (113). She contends that eternal generation could just as well be expressed by “Mother” or “Parent” (115). For Peeler, we should address God as Father simply because Jesus did so (112), and Jesus did so because “God invited a woman to bear a son” (19).<sup>3</sup> Peeler seems to be saying that Father/Son language is appropriate because of the trinitarian economy but not proper to the eternal relations of origin themselves. In my view, this is the fundamental error that puts her at odds with the tradition.

#### PROBLEMS WITH CHRISTOLOGY

The egalitarian tail wags the dog again in chapter 7, “The Male Savior.” Peeler argues that Christ is clearly male but that his maleness is different from all other males. All other males have flesh deriving from another male and a female. Jesus alone has flesh deriving from a female alone. According to Peeler, Jesus’ maleness and his female-derived flesh enable him to represent both male and female in his redemptive work. She writes:

If Jesus were not birthed as a male, he would not include male bodies in his recapitulation. If he were not birthed and conceived from a woman alone, he would not include female bodies in his recapitulation (145).

Peeler’s argument in this chapter constitutes

<sup>2</sup>In an interview about the book, Peeler encourages women not to use the term “Father” at all if it makes them uncomfortable while praying. She says, “I’ve had several people approach me... and say fatherhood language for God is almost impossible for me given my story. And I think the abundance of naming that we have in Scripture totally says to that person [that] you don’t have to take this term in your prayer life if you want to use one of the many other images names given for God.” See Phil Vischer, “Women and the Gender of God with Amy Peeler,” Holy Post Podcast, accessed January 16, 2023, <https://www.holypost.com/post/543-women-and-the-gender-of-god-with-amy-peeler>.

<sup>3</sup>Describing the incarnation, she says that “God, as fathers are, was the cause of the Son” (p. 116). Jesus calls God “Father” because Joseph was not his Father (116). Jesus refrains from calling God “mother” because he already has a mother — Mary (115). All of this suggests that Peeler views the names Father and Son as proper only to the trinitarian economy and not to the immanent trinity.

a basic Christological error. She is correct to argue that Jesus is male through and through and that he was born of a virgin's flesh. But she is wrong to make these the basis for his representation of males and females. After all, Adam represents all of mankind and yet has no mother or father but is simply the federal head of the human race by virtue of the special creation of God. Likewise, Jesus represents all people simply by virtue of his human nature.

Peeler's argument wrongly implies that Jesus must take on every accidental property a human could have in order to represent them. This is an error. Christ can represent blue-eyed people even if he had brown eyes. And the list could go on with any imaginable accidental property (including sex). Jesus' representation is contingent on his sharing the fullness of human nature. He is everything essential to humanity. This is the way the orthodox tradition has always understood passages like John 1:14 ("word became flesh"), Hebrews 2:14-18 ("like us in all ways"), and Philippians 2:5-8 ("form of a servant"). It's also the point of the Chalcedonian two-nature formula (consubstantial with us according to manhood) and the burden of the Apollinarian controversy (a full human nature, not a partial one).

Binary sex as such is essential to being human, but neither maleness nor femaleness is either more or less human than the other. The particular sex of a person is best thought of as a necessary type of the human nature. Neither sex is essential, but being sexed (as one of the two types) is essential. In a sense, it is precisely because Jesus is only one sex (male) that he is a fit representative of both sexes.

And in the biblical economy, by God's

design, covenant heads are male. To be human, he has to be one of the two sexes; to be last Adam, prophet, priest, king, etc., he has to be male and of Davidic descent. Peeler seems to misconstrue all of this.

## PROBLEMS INTERPRETING MARY'S PREGNANCY

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Peeler contends that the incarnation of Jesus within the body of Mary symbolizes God's approval of women in general. Peeler writes, "The sinful fruit of patriarchy may cause some to despise the female body, but the God of Judaism and Christianity did not" (62). On the contrary, "God's choice to allow the body of a woman, even the most intimate parts of herself, to come into direct contact with the body and blood of the Son stands against any who would deny women by virtue of the fact that they are women access to the holy" (62). Peeler thus argues that Mary and by extension all women are "worthy to handle the most sacred of all things, the very body of God" (61).

Peeler argues that because God called Mary to carry the body of Jesus, so also women can carry the body of Christ by serving the eucharist (63). As an Episcopalian priest, Peeler writes from a sacramental perspective, and her point is clear. Mary's pregnancy offers an implicit authorization of the ordination of women to priestly ministry. Her contention, however, is severely weakened by the fact that she doesn't deal with Pauline texts that teach male headship in marriage or that limit pastoral leadership to men (1 Cor. 11:3; 14:34-35; Eph. 5:22-33; 1 Tim. 2:12). In the conclusion, she admits that this book does not provide that engagement and that she may take up that work elsewhere (189). Nevertheless, it is difficult to accept any sweeping egalitarian

conclusions based merely on her reading of Matthew's and Luke's accounts of Mary.

And yet even here, Peeler's perspective on Mary stands in contrast to the Bible's depiction of Mary not as the "worthy" one but as the "favored" one (Lk 1:28). Mary was a sinner like all other people, but God showed his grace to her in calling her to be the mother of Jesus (Lk 1:30). She was chosen not because she deserved it but because of God's grace. All generations call her blessed not because of her own merits but because God in his mercy had done great things for her (Lk 1:49-50). Peeler's argument that Mary was worthy to bear the divine and that therefore women are now worthy to bear the divine (the eucharist) is not supported by what the text actually says about Mary in Luke 1. The analogy breaks down and so do the egalitarian conclusions that she draws from the analogy.

## CONCLUSION

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At the end of her book, Peeler addresses Christians who believe that the Bible defines "role distinctions" for men and women. She exhorts complementarians and the like not to hold their view on the basis of a belief that God is male (189-90). I can't imagine that she will find any pushback to that counsel because I can't think of a single complementarian who believes that God is male. Both sides of the debate on women's ordination confess that God is spirit and does not have a body. This

much we hold in common, and there is no real controversy about it.

Peeler is no radical feminist, but her work in this book is aimed largely at those who are—or at least those who may be persuaded by radical feminists. This leads her to a defensive posture concerning the Bible's masculine language for God. She sees that language as a problem to be solved, and in doing so she suggests some revisions to trinitarianism and Christology that cannot be sustained. It is these revisions that concern me most about *Women and the Gender of God*.<sup>4</sup>

Contrary to what Peeler claims, calling God Father is proper and necessary to the first person of the Trinity. "Father" and "Son" name the immanent life of the Trinity and are not dependent on the economy for their validity or reality. Christ can represent all people because he shares in their humanity, not because he is male and has female flesh derived from Mary. Peeler seems to miss these basic elements of Nicea and Chalcedon, and her book is the worse for it.

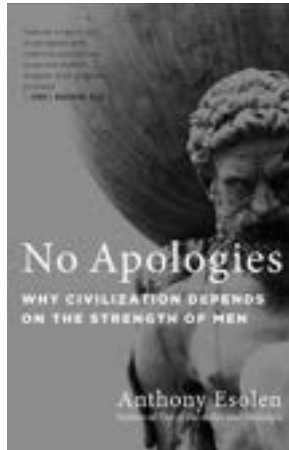
This book may be a step forward for egalitarianism, but it is a step backwards from Scripture and the Tradition. While I am glad that the argument does not suggest radical revisions along the lines of Mary Daly, it still flies too close to the sun and ultimately fails. ✕

<sup>4</sup> Complementarians had their own intramural discussion about the doctrine of God in the so-called "Trinity Debate" of 2016. For as difficult and acerbic as the conversation was at times (especially on social media), I think it ultimately served a good purpose for complementarianism. Perhaps a similar reconsideration will happen among egalitarians who may be finding themselves more and more reluctant about the Bible's masculine language for God. For those interested in my thoughts and interactions regarding the "trinity debate," see Denny Burk, "My Take-Away's from the Trinity Debate," Denny Burk: A Commentary on Theology, Politics, and Culture (blog), August 10, 2016, <https://www.dennyburk.com/my-take-aways-from-the-trinity-debate/>; Denny Burk, "A Clarification about a New Book on the Trinity," Denny Burk, June 19, 2019, <https://www.dennyburk.com/a-clarification-about-a-new-book-on-the-trinity/>; Denny Burk, "The Will of the Father and the Will of the Son in the Covenant of Redemption," Denny Burk, August 13, 2019, <https://www.dennyburk.com/the-will-of-the-father-and-the-will-of-the-son-in-the-covenant-of-redemption/>; Denny Burk, "The Difference between the Apple and the Worm," CBMW, February 7, 2022, <https://cbmw.org/2022/02/07/the-difference-between-the-apple-and-the-worm/>.

# *No Apologies: Why Civilization Depends on the Strength of Men*

As a university student, I remember stumbling upon an article in *The Atlantic*, “The End of Men.” Women now surpassed men in the workforce — to the betterment of society? Were women better adapted to a post-industrial workplace than men? Had we finally arrived at the end of men — ruling, leading, providing? That was over a decade ago.

Into a world further adrift in confusion, Anthony Esolen has written a book he himself wished need not be written. But write it, he did. And read it, we should. The title contains the tone — *No Apologies* — the subtitle, a thesis — *Why Civilization Depends on the Strength of Men*. Esolen attempts to convince us of what was once obvious: that this world does not run by



Anthony Esolen. *No Apologies: Why Civilization Depends on the Strength of Men*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 2022.



magic but is built and sustained by the might of men living happily as men.

What if we have come to the end of men? “It would mean our end, our death; imagine a great city, rotting at the core, with no one strong enough to shore up the ruins” (2). Six chapters chisel and sculpt man as civilization has needed him — then and now. And this against that ideology whose desire is contrary to the man: Feminism and all her sickly offspring.

### MAN AS HE WAS FASHIONED

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What kind of man does Esolen place before us?

First, Esolen chisels the muscles of this gritty warrior. He displays the forte, the force, the brawn of the taller, faster, thicker, action-craving man. God created the world, man builds it, which we can easily forget in a post-industrial, technically-advanced world. “Every road you see was laid by men. Every house, church, every school, every factory, every public building was raised by the hands of men. You eat with a stainless-steel fork; the iron was mined and the carbon was quarried by men. . . . The whole of your civilization rests upon the shoulders of men who have done work that most people will not do — and that the physically weaker sex could not have done” (x).

Feminism then, to Esolen, is an ungrateful fantasy, attempting to expel man from the city he built. She scribes her scathing treaties within a well-heated, warmly-lit world built (and sustained) by men. The oil in her pen, the paper upon her desk, the plastic in her Starbucks cup, the electricity

in her computer all join voice together to refute her — but she cannot hear them. And neither, often, can we. So with his engineer’s mind, Esolen examines the civilization we take for granted and points repeatedly to the small font scribbled on the infrastructure: “Made by Men.” Not by angels or elves, not by women or children, but by men — forgettable, forgotten, and too often flattened. No apologies, then, for men holding the plough to war with the earth — no one else can.

But the strength of men is not the only trait vital to our civilization. Esolen highlights man’s undaunted *agency* — a spirit that seeks difficult action — an agency that acts to serve others at cost to self: “what a man wants and what a man must do are seldom the same” (16). Heavy is the crown for which feminism gropes. Much of man’s thankless labor “demands a constant self-denial, a self-effacement. It says to the men what the battle says to a soldier: ‘You are not the central thing. This work is. Do it’” (38). A man must not just be physically strong but strong of spirit to rise to the challenge and needs of family and society. “I mean here to reject every philosophy that would cut the sinews of man” (49). Wryly, Esolen observes, “The world cannot run on courses in sociology or on politically enlightened novels. They do not think, *Who’s going to dig that well?*” (41, emphasis original). Good men gladly grab the shovel.

This means men must not be stifled by apathy, laziness, or low standards. He must harden the antlers, and must do so *within a team*. Men need unsafe spaces with other men; “safety can smother” (23). From a football huddle to an army regiment to a

*“So our civilization needs strong men, men with agency, men able to function as tiered units for the greater good of those under their leadership.”*

group of senators, Esolen argues for all-male, beneficial hierarchies that turn away the man from self to mission: “The team is more than a group. It is a hierarchically organized social engine, embodying both the equality that is the foundation of brotherhood and the frank recognition of inequality that enables men to multiply their strength most efficiently and with greatest satisfaction” (71). And this, to the benefit of all (despite the protests). Esolen writes, “What if the sign on the treehouse, No Girls Allowed, is not meant so much to keep girls away but to protect the male friendships from having to compete with eros — to attract the boys to male teams and to keep them in, ultimately for the good of the women that those same girls will become?” (87).

So our civilization needs strong men, men with agency, men able to function as tiered units for the greater good of those under their leadership. Esolen believes in patriarchy — the good kind — that lays its life down for those in its protection: “The women and the children are primary in the order of ends, and he is secondary and ancillary. They are indispensable, and he is indispensably dispensable: it is his great

virtue and honor to pour out his sweat and his blood for their sake” (82).

Against ideologies that attack father-headed families, Esolen strikes the note that resonates in all good men’s souls: “The father throws himself away in hope, looking forward to the time when he will be no more on earth than a name or a rumor of a name but his children will be alive, and people will say of him — if they remember him at all — that he was a good man but his children are better” (106).

#### **NO APOLOGIES**

Civilization still needs men: strong, with agency, forming teams, expending themselves for the good of communities and families. Esolen goes on to argue the necessity for male vision and the need for masculine religion that guards the holy.

Esolen’s project deals with reality, stubborn and inconvenient. He is after male-esteem, not machismo; virility, not vice; “quit you like men” (1 Cor. 16:13, KJV) rather than quit being men. As we cross to the other side of the Reformation (he is a conservative Roman Catholic) and

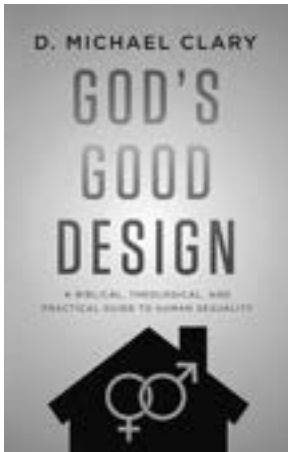
flip through the pages of *No Apologies*, we find exegesis of the world as God made it, but not much of Scripture. He cites ancient Greek poets at least as much, if not more, than God. Divine revelation makes cameos throughout, but common sense and natural law lay the foundations. What he observes in the world and says about it is helpful in our day, and what he leaves unsaid is not insignificant. Readers seeking a biblical groundwork for a robust vision of manhood need to look elsewhere.

“What did you go out into the wilderness to see?” Jesus once asked the crowds who flocked to John the Baptist. “A reed shaken by the wind?” When one reads Esolen, what does one see? Refreshingly, we find many things — a skilled storyteller, a lover of classical poetry and lore, a polymath with a writer’s pen ready to illustrate the necessity of men in a world increasingly suspicious of them. We find arguments drawn from boys playing baseball to men building Roman aqueducts to tours through the galleries of linguistics, mathematics, art, neurology, history, sabermetrics, and more — but no shaking reed, and no mumbled apologies. ✕

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# *God's Good Design: A Biblical, Theological, and Practical Guide to Human Sexuality*



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

In his recently published, *God's Good Design*, D. Michael Clary speaks about the moral and emotional bankruptcy promised by the sexual revolution, and, by contrast, the beauty and goodness of the Christian sexual ethic. Clary's book is not merely a diatribe against modern sexual madness; he posits a better story and revels in the beauty of God's design in human gender and sexuality. "In this book," Clary states up front, "we will demonstrate the truth, goodness, and beauty of God's design for sexuality. We will show how God's story of his covenant love for his people, ultimately revealed in the gospel, was a profound mystery, written into the created order from the beginning of time" (3). In this book, Clary neither engages in cowardly obfuscation nor boastful pugilism. Which is to say, the author refrains from virtue signaling, regardless of the audience. Instead, Clary writes with all the calm and clarity one should hope for in a trustworthy pastor. Because of this, Clary is sure to garner the approval of not a few evangelicals



exhausted by the whiplash of late modernity. Unfortunately, this book also comes with some significant downsides.

Structurally, *God's Good Design* does not necessarily hang together as a single, unbroken argument. Clary lays the foundation for what he intends to argue in the first three chapters, but for the rest of the book, he structures his chapters topically. While I think the book could have benefited from some rigorous editorial work to cut down repeated and redundant material, its topical arrangement (and repetitive content) means that it can serve fruitfully as a reference book of sorts.

Rather than offering a blow-by-blow summary of the book, I would like to commend three of its strengths (of which there are many more I could enumerate), before concluding with a reflection on three of its weaknesses (which, though far outnumbered by the many positive features

of the book, are nevertheless significant and, unfortunately, quite costly).

First, in terms of the book's strengths, Clary demonstrates a non-anxious confidence in the Christian vision of gender, sex, and sexuality. He understands that the blustering pearl-clutching of reactionaries (even of the conservative variety) is neither profitable nor becoming. The author opts instead to outshine the secular script with a story that is better, truer, and more beautiful than its secular alternative. Relatedly, Clary does marvelously at showing the mutual enrichment of men and women. The sexes, he shows convincingly, are made *for* one another (132).

Second, Clary attends carefully to both books of divine revelation: sacred Scripture and Nature. In this way, he shows how God's specially revealed assigned gender roles in the home and in the church are not arbitrary; they cohere with the way in which

he made man and woman. In other words, to submit to divine revelation regarding matters like headship and submission (in the home and in the church) is to go along with the grain of created reality. Clary concludes, along with the best of the Great Tradition's reflections on natural theology, that the difference between men and women has everything to do with biological teleology: *fatherhood* and *motherhood*. In this way, Clary approaches his subject material from numerous vantage points to tie together again what should have never been torn asunder: marriage, sex, and procreation.

Third, Clary writes with a pastoral sensitivity that is desperately needed in today's discourse. Clary is direct but not callused; tender but not cowardly. He is also careful to distinguish between what Scripture plainly teaches and requires, and what he thinks is a wise application of biblical truth. One can tell that Clary is a shepherd who has learned to take seriously the requirement to bind his flock's consciences to what Scripture requires without overstepping the boundary of "teaching as commandments the teaching of men" (cf., Matt. 15:9).

So much for Clary's strengths. The first of the few weaknesses in Clary's book is his appeal to "Gnosticism," which stands in as a bogeyman throughout the volume. "The modern confusion around sexuality," Clary asserts, "bears much resemblance to ancient Gnosticism, a heresy condemned by the early church" (8). How so? What hath twenty-first century sexual madness to do with ancient Gnosticism? Unfortunately, the comparison Clary brings out is grossly superficial: "the modern claim that someone's gender can be different than their biological sex is a gnostic idea" (8). Clary seems to imply that there is only one philosophy that can drive

an insurmountable wedge between the "self" and the "material world," and it is called "Gnosticism." But such a wedge does not a Gnostic make. For one thing, antipathy for the material world is not a solely Gnostic idea: it is an idea that Gnosticism has in common with other systems of thought that have little or nothing to do with Gnosticism, properly speaking. If Clary wishes to call the modern confusion about sexuality "Gnosticism," he will need to substantiate that claim with more than the passing resemblance of hatred for the material world.

Further, even the feature of Gnosticism that distinguishes between "the spiritual" and "the material" to such a high degree bears little substantive resemblance to late modernity's contemporary weirdness surrounding gender and sexuality. The idea that "material is evil and we must escape it" does *not* equate to "the material universe is endlessly malleable and we can therefore conform it to our wishes." In fact, the gender ideology of the trans movement today positively requires *some kind of* embrace of the material world. The "trans person" is not happy to *transcend* or *escape* his material body. Quite the opposite. He cannot be happy until his material body conforms to his inner "her-ness" — he *needs* the material body for fulfillment. This desire is a far cry from Gnosticism.

Second, Clary's lack of precision in language becomes a liability at a number of important junctures. One example regards his elaborations on the difference between men and women which, Clary says, correspond to "differing natures" (46). What Clary means by this is not entirely clear, from a philosophical point of view. On the one hand, Clary affirms that men and women both fit in the category of "humanity," and therefore share a common human nature and human

*telos*: namely, to glorify God and enjoy him forever. However, Clary states that men and women have differing natures corresponding to differences manifested in masculinity and femininity. But positing different natures is not necessary for making sense of the intrinsic difference between men and women, even considering Clary’s (helpful) reflections on potency and teleology. If human nature includes the potentiality to procreate, men reach their biological *telos* by begetting, and women reach theirs by conceiving. This does not mean they have different *natures*, only that they substantiate a common nature (i.e., human nature) in distinctly gendered ways — an individual existence of the human essence is always either male or female. Unfortunately, Clary’s imprecision of language opens the possibility that he intends to communicate that men and women are of a different ontological *kind*.

A third and related weakness outweighs the other two previously mentioned: Clary errs in developing his broad theological framework for gender roles. Rather than stumbling into the common mistake of rooting gender roles in some sort of hierarchy within the godhead, Clary (rightly) roots gender roles in the divine *economy*. However, Clary errs by rooting their differences in the relationship between God and his creation. In this framework, the cosmos is God’s household, with man as God’s analogue, and woman as creation’s (29–39). Clary states emphatically that the “creator-creature distinction is mirrored in the sexual differences between men and women” (32). “This does not mean,” he hastens to assure us, “that men are more like God than women, or that women are less like God than men” (29). But the overall structure of Clary’s argument screams otherwise. While I appreciate Clary’s intention to defend the biblical practice of referring to God in strictly

masculine terms, he defends this practice on inappropriate grounds by muddling the conceptual difference between *theologia* and *oikonomia*. For Clary, man glorifies God by being like God, and woman glorifies God by being like creation. When it comes to gender relations, man’s analogical referent is God, while woman’s is creation. But Scripture has already given a theological corollary between the relationship between man and woman (or, more precisely, husbands and wives), and it is not the creator-creature distinction; it is rather the Christ-Church distinction (Eph. 5:22–33).

Further, not only is Clary’s framework strictly unnecessary (since it is not the framework Scripture explicitly provides), and not only does it run the risk of placing man ontologically higher than woman, it also runs the risk of mutualizing the God-creation relationship. Let me explain. If the creator-creature distinction is mirrored in the way that men and women relate, it seems we must conclude that either (a) man is superior to, and definitional for, woman, *or* (b) God needs creation just like man needs woman, such that both are *mutually* enriched by one another. Both alternatives are theologically disastrous. Clary is right to see a clue for the foundation of the relationship between man and woman in the notion of *headship*, but he is wrong in identifying the creator-creature distinction as the archetypal instance of headship (36–38). The archetypal instance of headship is, rather, Christ and his headship over the Church. All this being the case, while I appreciated the majority of *God’s Good Design*, I cannot commend it without these sober caveats. ✕

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REVIEWED BY JEREMIAH GREEVER

# *The Great Sex Rescue: The Lies You've Been Taught and How to Recover What God Intended*



## INTRODUCTION

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According to the authors of the book, *The Great Sex Rescue: The Lies You've Been Taught and How to Recover What God Intended*, evangelical Christianity needs a new understanding regarding sex. Writing primarily to Christian women, while also periodically addressing men, the authors repeatedly state their goal to “deconstruct harmful ideas” from the *prima facie* view of marital sex (36). Using sociological data, the authors “want to call Christians back to first principles about sex the way God intended” (13). By seeking to redefine definitions, interpretations, and expectations, the book’s focus is to give Christian marriages greater intimacy, sex, and marital satisfaction.

## SUMMARY

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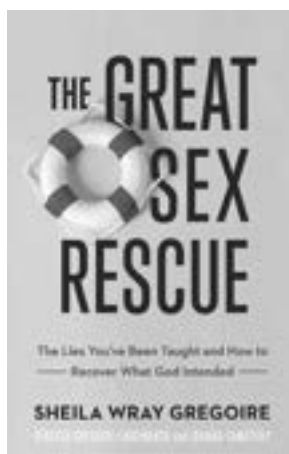
Sheila Gregoire joins her daughter, Rebecca Lindenbach, and epidemiologist Joanna Sawatsky to ask the question, “Are Christian women having great sex,” and if not, why not? To answer these questions, the authors surveyed over twenty thousand evangelical women “about their sex lives, their marriages, their beliefs about sex and marriage, their upbringing, and more” (11). The goal of the book is to determine if evangelical teaching is the culprit for marital dissatisfaction. To make this determination, the authors selected the top thirteen rated Amazon books on Christian marriage (and a secular bestselling marriage book as comparison) that discussed sex and evaluated them as





either harmful or helpful. The assessment found the great majority of Christian marriage books to be inadequate (and explicitly labeled them as harmful) due to their teaching in the categories of infidelity and lust, pleasure and libido, and mutuality. Popular books such as “Love & Respect,” “His Needs, Her Needs,” and “Every Man’s Battle” were especially rated as harmful.

The authors address various aspects of sex and sexuality in the book — everything from mutual pleasure, understanding spousal preferences, lust, and obligation intimacy. Potential readers should be wise to the fact that although the book is not sordid, it is blunt about sex. Throughout the book, the authors share personal anecdotes from women who participated



Sheila Wray Gregoire, Rebecca Gregoire Lindenbach, and Joanna Sawatsky. *The Great Sex Rescue: The Lies You've Been Taught and How to Recover What God Intended*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021.

in the survey regarding their marital intimacy. These often-heartbreaking accounts involve marital dissatisfaction in intimacy, selfish husbands, and internal strife regarding sex. Though Scripture is periodically mentioned, the primary authority for the book's teachings derives from the testimonies and sociological data. Each chapter contains copious amounts of graphs as proof for various marital assertions. The book concludes with encouragement for women and admonitions to both men and ministry leaders.

#### CRITICAL INTERACTION

*The Great Sex Rescue* is a classic example of highlighting a problem without sufficiently contributing to its solution. While the authors helpfully critique some problematic teachings, they fail to provide a biblical remedy. Faithful Christians will appreciate the exposure of sinful behavior in marriage, such as the demand for sex. Christians ought to be the loudest proponents condemning marital abuse and rape, as the authors make plain — “marital rape and sexual assault, whether by physical force or coercive threats, are real and wrong” (186).

This book also excels in arguing against selfishness in marital intimacy. God did not design sex to be a manipulative tool used by spouses for personal gain. Marital satisfaction comes from reflecting Christ to one another. Recognizing the necessity of kindness in marriage, the authors contemplate, “what would happen if we saw sex as an opportunity to mirror Christ’s servanthood to our spouse?” (201). In a culture transfixed with sex as a machination for self, *The Great Sex*

“When sociological data becomes the definitive authority, preconceived notions shape how we interpret the data.”

*Rescue* clearly calls for sex to be mutually beneficial, desirable, and pleasurable. Though I personally have not read the critiqued bestselling Christian marriage books, I found the authors’ assessments of ill-advised anecdotes and marital tropes to be refreshing.

In my assessment, however, the helpful points in *The Great Sex Rescue* are outweighed by some significant errors. My concerns begin with the book’s authority — the sociological data. While this data may be helpful, it cannot be considered definitive. Bias in data analysis is real precisely because no one impartially reads data. When sociological data becomes the definitive authority, preconceived notions shape how we interpret the data. Correlation does not always equal causation, and survey questions

ascertaining women's preconceived beliefs regarding marital intimacy often miss outlying context that shapes their experience. Marital dissatisfaction could result from unbiblical teaching, but it could also be exacerbated by unfulfilled expectations, felt needs, or identity crises. Though the authors present their sociological findings as authoritative, similar studies directly contradict the conclusions in *The Great Sex Rescue*. A 2019 World Family Map sociological report finds, "highly religious traditional women being significantly more likely to be sexually satisfied than women in all other groups — including highly religious progressive women." Many factors shape data, making sociological studies helpful but insufficient for final analysis. Applicable parts do not justify a whole argument. Discerning readers should cautiously evaluate sociological data as part of the issue, rather than the *coup de grâce* of the argument.

Data interpretation also varies based upon one's theological worldview and framework. The authors' presented worldview raises concerns for those committed to biblical complementarianism. The authors make a critical error in conflating biblical gender roles as causative for abuse and marital dissatisfaction. "When we set up marriages where a husband has decision-making power, we create marriages in which his opinions, by definition, matter more than hers...sex suffers and marriages crumble" (33). This conclusion is based upon preconceived ideology rather than objective fact. The 2019 World Family Map found a contrary conclusion, "Our analysis of shared decision-making patterns proved to be more balanced across relationship types and gender ideologies...traditional

women in highly religious couples reported similar levels of shared decision-making as their secular progressive counterparts." Consequently, the authors of *The Great Sex Rescue* commit a red herring fallacy when conflating biblical male headship as determinative for male dominance. The two are not the same. Paul clearly defines gender roles in Ephesians 5:22-33, calling husbands to lead selflessly like Christ and for wives to submit to their husbands as to the Lord. While the authors admonish husbands to be kind to their wives, the book is conspicuously silent on calling wives to biblically submit to their husbands. More troubling is the authors' recommendation to abandon biblical language in lieu of an acceptable alternative — "Instead of saying, 'You do not have authority over your body; your spouse does [1 Corinthians 7:4],' say, 'God wants sex to be a mutual, loving experience'" (178).

The book, then, not only wrongly bases its conclusions on inconclusive sociological data, but it wrongly assumes that complementarianism — the bible's teaching on gender roles — leads to abuse. The book lacks balance regarding the roles of husbands *and* wives and therefore points readers away from consistent biblical teaching. Faithful Christians must be clear — the answer to marital abuse is a return to biblical complementarianism, not an overcorrection to a caricature of the biblical teaching.

However, my greatest concern with *The Great Sex Rescue* is the lack of clear, biblical explanation of God's purpose for sex. The book's emphasis regarding sex leans toward a humanistic understanding of intimacy. Rather than setting the focus of sex on its ultimate end — to glorify God

— the book prioritizes sex as a subjective, self-focused feeling. “*You* is the key word. *You* are the focus. Sex is not just about *me*; it’s about *me* knowing *you* and building *us*” (22, emphasis in original). This emphasis leads to conflating Christlikeness with kindness: “...it all starts with acting in a Christlike way toward your spouse. And that boils down to kindness” (213). While Christianity certainly calls Christians to marital kindness, reducing marital intimacy to kindness falls short of the biblical vision. God designed sex to be a gift freely given to one another as a spiritually symbolic icon. The physical union between a husband and wife is an experiential, emotional, and spiritual representation of the nourishing and cherishing of Christ to his church (Ephesians 5:29). Christian spouses freely and fully give themselves to one another in marriage, representing the fullness of Christ’s reversal of sin’s curse of shame (1 Corinthians 7:3-4). Simply put, the ultimate meaning and purpose for marital sex and sexuality is to please Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:9) by glorifying God (Colossians 3:17). *The Great Sex Rescue* fails to illuminate this beauty of the Gospel in marriage.

## CONCLUSION

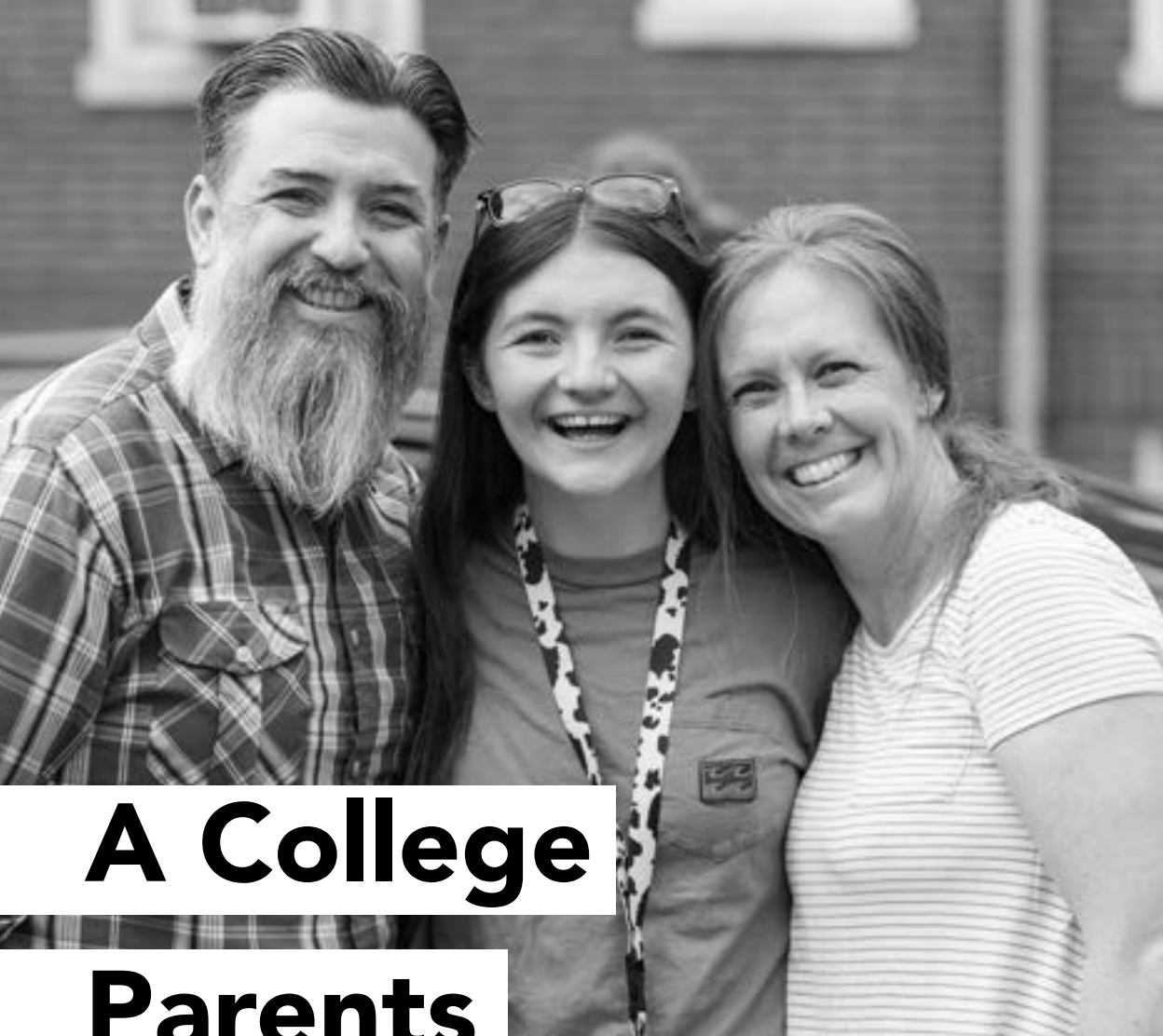
*The Great Sex Rescue* rightly identifies troubling statistics in Christian marriages, and faithful Christianity should heed its concerns. I’m thankful for the book’s information and warnings, and evangelical Christianity would be wise to listen to the voices of those hurting silently in marriages. In this regard, *The Great Sex Rescue* is helpful in giving a voice to those often neglected. But discerning Christians would be wise to find resources that provide answers from a consistent

and thorough biblical framework which point hearts to Christ alone as the answer. Marital motivation must first be Christ, not spousal satisfaction. It’s not enough to get parts of the problem right, we must confidently provide the right answer — Solus Christus. Marriage is simply too important to not get right. ✕

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