

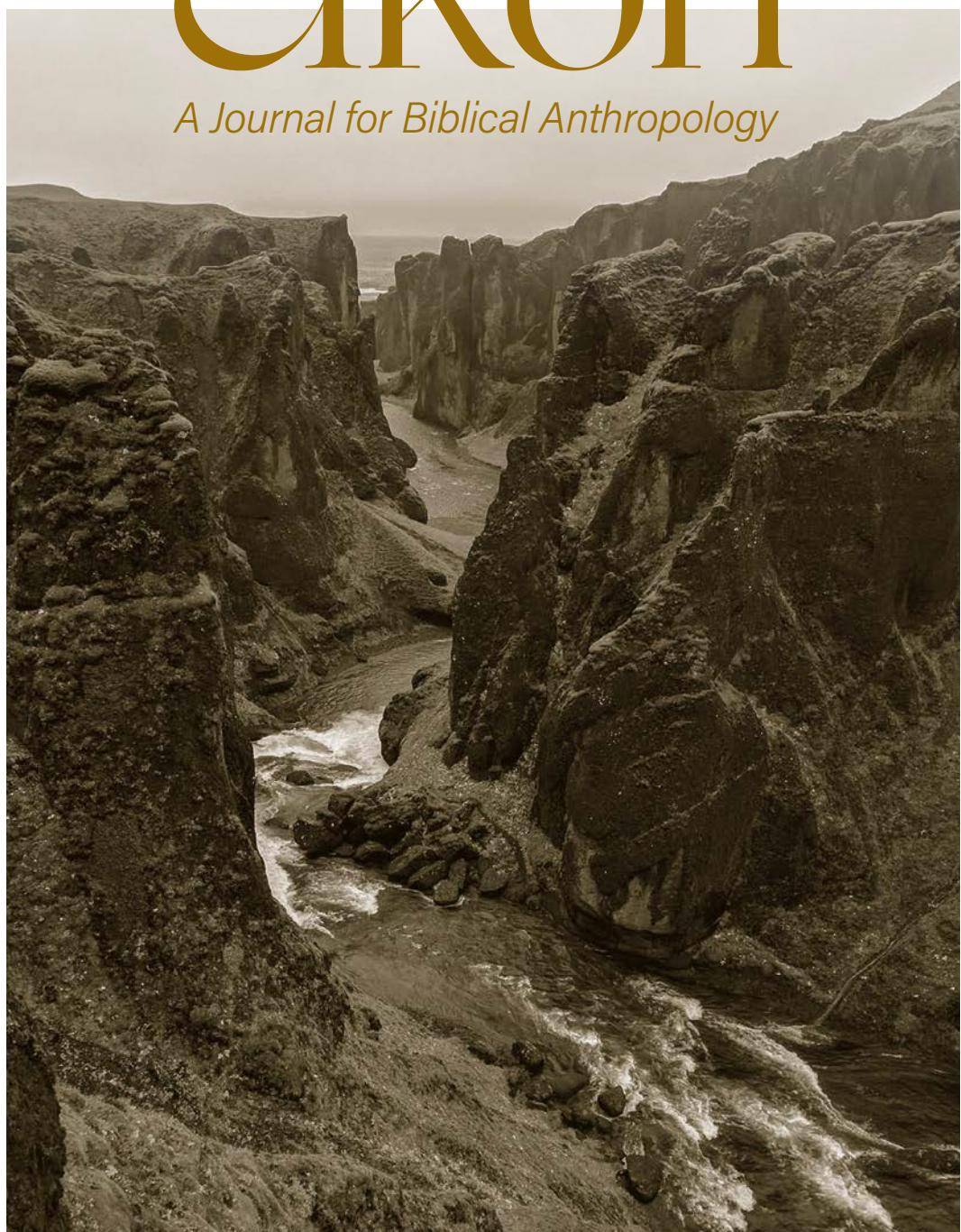
THE CONSTITUTION OF
MAN: AN EXAMINATION OF
MONISM, DICHOTOMY, AND
TRICHOTOMY
Drew Sparks

THE CHRISTOLOGICAL
ARC OF MAN'S ORIGINAL
GOODNESS
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A HISTORY OF
COMPLEMENTARIANISM
Claire Smith

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A Journal for Biblical Anthropology





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What is man?



WHAT IS MAN?

What is man? There is little doubt that this is the primary question of our age. And it is one that the Bible not only asks (Psalm 8), but provides a definitive answer. Yet, modern man has largely rejected its wisdom, and we encounter the destructive consequences daily.

Downstream from the denial of God's definition of man lie the grim realities not merely tolerated, but *promoted* in our culture. We see such realities in the wanton disregard for life in abortion, euthanasia, and the destruction of human embryos used for IVF and scientific study — the latter of which comes with the promise of societal "advancement." We see it in our culture's re-conception of sex, from

a good to be enjoyed within marriage for both intimacy and to beget a family, to a mere expression of one's individual desires.

From this transformation came the radical redefinition of marriage, moving from a procreative union to one of self-fulfillment. No longer is marriage — a covenantal commitment between husband and wife — considered the irreplaceable, foundational institution from which families are formed and strong communities built. Thanks to our technological evolution, we no longer need such a passé view of marriage, not with IVF and surrogacy on hand to make and purchase babies-on-demand.

In all of this, the ironic, dual degradation

and commodification of children, as objects of either inconvenience or luxury, stands out in the contrast between both abortion and surrogacy.

Along the way we slowly, then suddenly, began to redefine ourselves entirely. Through progressive waves of feminism, we made man and woman *socially* interchangeable; through the sexual revolution, we made man and women *sexually* interchangeable; through cultural revolution, the sexual revolutionaries completed their capstone project by mainstreaming the "T" in LGBT. Transgenderism has now made man and women *ontologically* interchangeable.

For this reason, transgenderism has stood

out as the definitive icon of our culture's confusion over what it means to be human. This confusion evinces itself in the dissolution of definitions for man and woman. We literally can no longer define what a woman is. And since we can no longer define what a woman is, we go a step further and dismantle related designations, such as "mother," and replace them with more "inclusive" (i.e., politically correct) terms, such as the intentionally gender-ambiguous, "birthing person." All of this proves G.K. Chesterton correct when he wrote that "It's the first effect of not believing in God that you lose your common sense, and can't see things as they are."¹

While we wish we were merely dealing with words, the truth is that these words — and

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "The Oracle of the Dog," in *The Incredulity of Father Brown* (London: Cassell and Company, 1926), 105.

the ideas they represent — have wounded, maimed, and sterilized untold numbers of children and adults and destroyed countless families. Ideas really do have consequences. And as it turns out, sowing ideas that run contrary to our nature ends up reaping destruction on that nature when fully lived out. Given these self-evident truths, we need no prophet to predict the truth that the surgical and chemical mutilation, especially among the youngest members of society, will in the future be judged a very dark period of our history. And it will be judged with greater condemnation, given that so many “experts” threw caution to the wind and aided and abetted the proliferation of such abject evil.

When man becomes god

But perhaps I may suggest an even more ghoulish representative for the loss of biblical anthropology in our times: transhumanism. Whereas transgenderism blurs the essential differences between man and woman, transhumanism obliterates human nature entirely. Taking Charles Darwin’s naturalistic materialism and Silicon Valley’s technological utopianism to their logical conclusions, transhumanism proposes a future where humans no longer exist, or at least no longer exist in the way we understand today.

Transhumanist thinkers such as Yuval Noah Harari predict that mankind will “transcend” the “biologically determined limits” of natural selection and become gods.² Triumphally, Harari writes,

Having secured unprecedented levels of prosperity, health and harmo-

ny, and given our past record and our current values, humanity’s next targets are likely to be immortality, happiness and divinity. Having reduced mortality from starvation, disease and violence, we will now aim to overcome old age and even death itself. Having saved people from abject misery, we will now aim to make them positively happy. And having raised humanity above the beastly level of survival struggles, we will now aim to upgrade humans into gods, and turn *Homo sapiens* into *Homo deus*.³

To do so, man must revolutionize the course of history. Having allegedly evolved over the course of four-billion years through natural selection, man will now *transcend* this biologically determined order and become a god. As Harari contends, we are “now beginning to break the laws of natural selection, replacing them with the laws of intelligent design.”⁴ In sum, mankind will move from *created* to *creator*. I hope you see the illogical hubris here.

But what will this mean for mankind? And what of human nature? While the metaphysics are necessarily blurry, mankind is set to be replaced by something else entirely:

Unless some nuclear or ecological catastrophe destroys us first, the pace of technological development will soon lead to the replacement of *Homo sapiens* by completely different beings who possess not only different physiques, but also very differ-

ent cognitive and emotional worlds.... beings with emotions and identities like ours will no longer exist, and our place will be taken by alien life forms whose abilities dwarf our own.⁵

Since man, according to the transhumanist, is but one stop on the evolutionary railway of natural selection, we should expect that he will at some point evolve into something unrecognizable. But the extraordinary claim of transhumanism is that man will no longer be subject to “biologically determined limits,” but instead, “breaking free” of these (seemingly formerly deterministic) limits, man will become intelligent, god-like designers of a new species.⁶ According to Harari, this transfiguration will take place slowly, as man merges with forthcoming hardware and software technology:

Homo sapiens is likely to upgrade itself step by step, merging with robots and computers in the process, until our descendants will look back and realise that they are no longer the kind of animal that wrote the Bible, built the Great Wall of China and laughed at Charlie Chaplin’s antics. This will not happen in a day, or a year. Indeed, it is already happening right now, through innumerable mundane actions. Every day millions of people decide to grant their smartphone a bit more control over their lives or try a new and more

⁵ Harari, *Sapiens*, 412.

⁶ Harari, *Sapiens*, 397.

⁷ Harari, *Homo Deus*, 49.

⁸ A larger portion of the context is worth quoting: “There was nothing special about humans. Nobody, least of all humans themselves, had any inkling that their descendants would one day walk on the moon, split the atom, fathom the genetic code and write history books. The most important thing to know about prehistoric humans is that they were insignificant animals with no more impact on their environment than gorillas, fireflies, or jellyfish.” Harari, *Sapiens*, 4 (emphasis added).

⁹ Harari, *Sapiens*, 403, 410.

¹⁰ Harari, *Homo Deus*, 44.

¹¹ Harari, *Homo Deus*, 386–387.

¹² Harari, *Homo Deus*, 45.

¹³ Harari, *Homo Deus*, 387.

effective antidepressant drug. In pursuit of health, happiness and power, humans will gradually change first one of their features and then another, and another, until they will no longer be human.⁷

Although a remarkable prediction, we should perhaps not be shocked that those who believe there is “nothing special about humans”⁸ evolving over billions of years through natural selection would also maintain that man could again be evolved and ultimately erased by “superhumans”⁹ or “godlings.”¹⁰ In an evolutionary worldview, “human nature” can only refer to a snapshot of time in an unending process of gradual transformation. And when life is defined as mere “data processing,”¹¹ we should not be surprised to find transhumanist prophets musing that “life will break out into the vastness of the inorganic realm” as some kind of legitimate analog to human life.¹²

In the end, where transgenderism blurs the line between man and woman, transhumanism blurs the line between man and machine, degrading man to a data processor — an “obsolete algorithm.”¹³

Foundations for anthropology

As stated above, each of these truly dystopian distortions of human nature flow from a rejection of God and his Word. Over the past two centuries in the West-

² Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York, NY: Harper, 2015), 397.

³ Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (New York, NY: Harper, 2017), 21.

⁴ Harari, *Sapiens*, 397.

*We cannot overstate the fact that apart from these *principia*, man cannot justify the existence of, or our knowledge of, anything.*

ern world, it has become apparent that Satan, having attacked on the battlefield these two foundations, is now waging a most gruesome war on human nature.

Protestants have for centuries understood that all true knowledge rests on these two foundations (*principia*) — God and his Word.¹⁴ For apart from God's being, we have no existence. And apart from his self-revelation to us, we can have no "sufficient, certain, and infallible"¹⁵ knowledge of God and all things in relation to him.¹⁶ Thus, God himself forms the ontological foundation for all being and knowledge. This conviction flows from the truth that our Triune Lord is God of himself, eternally-existing and the giver of life to all creation. As God has life in himself and grants it to his creatures, so too God has all knowledge in himself and communicates this knowledge to his creatures. Just as his divine life is the basis for our

life, so too his divine knowledge forms the basis for our finite knowledge. And just as we do not share his divine being, neither do we share his divine knowledge. Our knowledge, as we say, is accommodated and analogical. While it is true knowledge, we know it *as creatures*, whereas God knows all things *as God*.

We cannot overstate the fact that apart from these *principia*, man cannot justify the existence of, or our knowledge of, *anything*. And insofar as man sets himself in opposition to them, he will find himself not only in idolatry, but self-destruction. And that is exactly what we are seeing today. Apart from the objective Being behind all things and his objective Word to reveal and define them, man is left to the miseries of his own contrivance.

The contrivances of feminism and egalitarianism have erased our social order

and established walls of hostility between the sexes; homosexuality denies our sexual complementarity, demeans the body, and redefines marriage and the family; transgenderism bends reality by severing the connection between sex and gender, alienating our bodies from our sense of self¹⁷; and transhumanism paradoxically dehumanizes and deifies human nature by degrading him to an impersonal information processor. Each of these, in their own way, denies God and his intention for humanity and leads us down the road of demeaning and destroying ourselves. And make no mistake, we are destroying ourselves. The epidemic of depression, loneliness, anxiety, and suicide represent symptoms of a culture that has suppressed the knowledge of God and turned inward to the labyrinth of the self as the measure of all things. Apart from God and the light of his revelation, there is no escaping such a nihilistic maze.

Since its founding, CBMW has sought to teach the truth about men and women, revealed in both nature and Scripture, acknowledging that such truths are ultimately grounded in God and his Word. We dedicate this issue to continuing that tradition by focusing on key doctrinal commitments that form a critical starting point for understanding the critical anthropological issues of our time. We hope that in doing so, we will further anchor our anthropological applications in God's enduring revelation. 

¹⁴ For more on the *principia* of theology, see Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 288–290; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996) 1:93–97; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volume 1: Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 210–214; for a more recent exposition of these ideas, see Stephen J. Wellum, *Systematic Theology: From Canon to Concept: Volume 1* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2024), 85–105.

¹⁵ Second London Baptist Confession 1689/77, 1.1, <https://www.the1689confession.com/1689/chapter-1>.

¹⁶ This wording is close to that of Stephen Wellum, who defines systematic theology as "the orderly, comprehensive 'study of the triune God' and all things in relationship to him." Wellum, *Systematic Theology*, 6.

Jonathan E. Swan is
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¹⁷ See Nancy Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions About Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018).

From the Pastor's Desk: Telling a Better Story

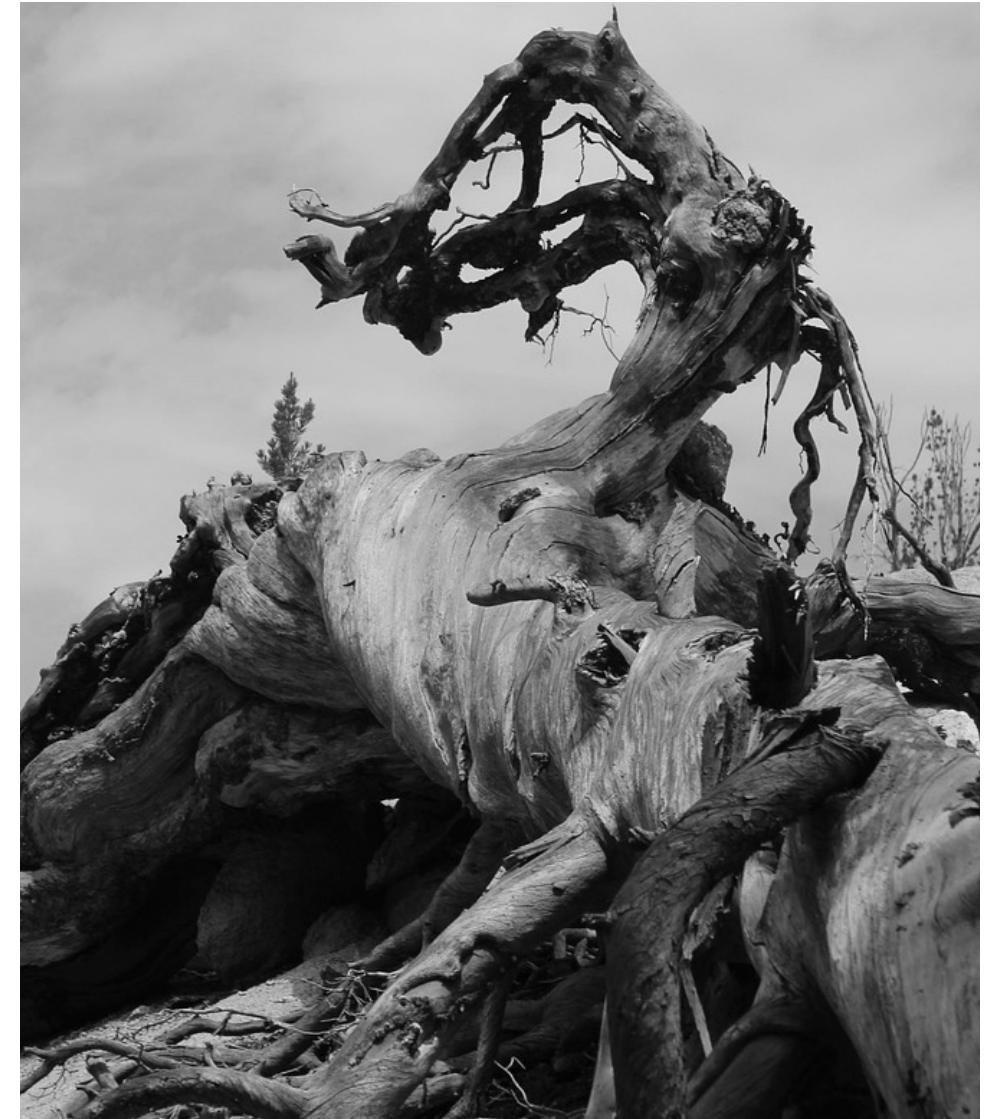
The church's focus on matters of sexuality and gender seems to some like an unhealthy preoccupation. It is not difficult to find critics both inside and outside the church expressing incredulity and even mockery over the time and energy that churches, denominations, and various Christian ministries have dedicated to these subjects. But we didn't start the fire. The reason there has been an uptick in Christian resources focusing on gender, marriage, sexuality, the body, etc. is because of the unprecedented attempts to upend even the most basic facts of life that everyone in the world knew until about fifteen minutes ago. The boundaries are being pushed so furiously that the debate over homosexuality seems almost passé. Indeed, many celebrity evangelicals have now openly affirmed homosexuality as though to do other-

wise is against the very spirit of Christian charity.

TRANSGRESSING GOD'S BOUNDARIES

Ever the transgressors, men and women have sought not only to push God's boundaries, but to obliterate them entirely. From the beginning, sin has been humanity's foolish gamble at self-deification. It is an attempt to be a law unto ourselves through the deliberate rejection of God's law. The first sin, as described in Genesis 3, was an attempt to be like God in a way that was never intended for humanity.

Transgressing the boundaries God had established regarding sexuality and marriage is a reach for godhood just as much as the more recent gender rebellion is. In these ways, men and women are seeking



to usurp God's wise and gracious authority while simultaneously imagining themselves to be gods.

For this reason, we may understand homosexuality and transgenderism as species of paganism. They are the fruit of the denial of the first two chapters of Genesis. They are deliberate movements away from the order, harmony, and life-giving goodness of God's design in favor of the chaos and dis-integration of pagan myths.

God-given complementarity is traded away for sin-induced confusion.

Now we are told that women can be men, that men can give birth, and that removing the sexual organs from healthy children and mutilating their bodies is not only acceptable but of vital necessity for their well-being. Such grave deceptions have caused confusion not just "out there," but even within the church — especially among our children. And so the need

...what is truly needed is better preaching and teaching on the doctrines of creation and mankind.

for faithful, clear, and focused catechesis concerning what it means to be man and woman in the image of God, the purpose of the body, sexuality, and marriage have never been more pressing.

When I was in high school in the 1980s, it was not costly to affirm the sinfulness of homosexuality. Most of my unbelieving friends agreed. But today, homosexuality is viewed as an unmitigated good. Signs in our neighbors' yards declare, "In this house we believe that love is love." And without any sense of irony at all, those same signs state that "we believe in science."

Sexual liberation (even liberation from one's own body) has become part of the cultural water in which we swim, what Charles Taylor referred to as our "social imaginary." And the gender revolution is achieving the same status. Again, when I was younger, transgenderism was not even on the radar beyond our knowledge that there were "cross dressers." The idea that someone could be a woman trapped in a man's body was ridiculous to everyone except for the rare guest on the Phil Donahue Show.

In those days, the widely accepted biblical prohibitions against such sins as homosexuality had more to do with the so-called "yuck factor" than a deeply held sense of loyalty to God and an understanding of his Word and his world. And while some may wish that more young people today had the same sort of reflexive yuck factor of past generations, what is truly needed is better preaching and teaching on the doctrines of creation and mankind. What is needed is better instruction on the *telos* or "end" of the body, sexuality, and marriage.

The good news is that the Scriptures explain why God has placed boundaries on human sexual expression. The Bible tells us that the complementarity of male and female is essential to our being God's image bearers. God tells us why marriage is solely for a man and woman. And it is all good news. God's pattern for us in these matters leads, quite literally, to life. His boundaries protect our physical health and lead to the flourishing of human communities, providing a foundation for societal stability. His design even publicly displays the love that Christ has for his church.

DISCARDING GOD'S DESIGN

We do not have to wonder what happens when God's design for sexuality, marriage, and gender are repeatedly violated. The evidence is all around us and has been for as long as men and women have sought to violate that design. The toll such violations exact upon the human body are devastating as any perusal of the CDC's website demonstrates. Not only that, violations of God's design for sexuality and marriage leads to the weakening of the social fabric. Fatherlessness is one of the chief factors contributing to violence, promiscuity, and poverty. But in addition to these social ills, we must now consider what will be the outcome for a society that allows doctors to perform double mastectomies on healthy twelve year old girls and castrate young boys.

When God's good design for the body is cast aside, life itself is inevitably devalued. Deemed to be "human but less than human," our little ones in the womb are destroyed by the millions. Such a violent transgression against the natural affection between parent and child has no doubt contributed to the ongoing tragedy of child abuse and fueled the growing practice of doctor assisted killing of the aged, sick, and depressed. In such a world, children become little more than a lifestyle ornament. The real Handmaid's Tale is enacted each day as homosexual couples purchase babies from women functioning simply as gestating units.

With such clear benefits to God's design and the tragic detriments to violating it, one wonders why men and women continue to press so hard into such death-dealing transgressions. But this is

simply the deadly cycle of sin. One transgression leads to another. Sin metastasizes. As God's signature in nature is cast aside, the horrors visited upon the human body, the family, and society are inevitable and increasingly corrosive.

TELLING A BETTER STORY

In light of these cultural pathologies, pastors must be equipped to do more than simply repeat the Scriptural prohibitions against sexual sin. We must also frame those prohibitions in the same ways that the Scriptures frame them. Certainly, the biblical prohibitions against sexual sins and the boundaries God places around how we may and may not use our bodies must be stated clearly. But the biblical prescriptions for the use of the body and the boundaries around sexual intimacy are not commands to be abstracted from the rest of Scripture. Those commands come to us within the story the Bible tells about God and humanity, sin and salvation. The Bible tells the story that explains why God designed sexual intimacy for the blessing of a man and woman in the bonds of marriage for their mutual pleasure, the deepening of their love for one another, and with an eye toward expanding the human family.

The Bible tells us — quite beautifully and in a way that is both intellectually and spiritually satisfying — *why* God created us as complementary gendered persons. The Bible tells us why God has imposed clear boundaries around the use of our bodies. God's Word places the *telos* of the body, sexuality, and marriage within its meta-narrative — the grand all-encompassing story that functions in part to interpret all of life. This biblical meta-narrative

rative explains God's very clear "No" by way of his blessed "Yes!" And this story must be proclaimed in our pulpits, in our Sunday School classes, and in our homes.

One of the great advantages that the Bible has is its age. Christopher Watkin observes that the Bible, because it is not a product of our culture, does not share our culture's blind spots. Watkin writes:

[The Bible] was, in fact, written over a period of more than a millennium to and about communities that are by turns nomadic, agrarian, monarchical, exiled, and occupied. This cultural and historical diversity means that the Bible — in contrast to almost all current theoretical approaches or 'theories' — is not hidebound by any single age or any single cultural context, least of all our own.¹

What this means for our present purposes is that the story the Bible tells about sexuality, gender, and what it means to be human is not bound to any one nation, culture, or epoch. It has the advantage of transcending national, cultural, or chronological confines. It translates into the cultures and countries of all the peoples of the world.

MEETING THE CHALLENGES

A big challenge for Christians is that the story the world tells about sexuality, gender, and what it means to be human is an easy one to tell. It is highly appealing emotionally. It involves no complexity. It fits easily on yard signs and car bumpers. What is more, the world's story is being

told through movies, television programs, journalists, music, teachers, commercials, and politicians. What this means practically is that we will not be able to out argue most of the people we encounter who believe the world's story. What we must learn to do is out-narrate the world.

The good news is that because the story we tell is God's story, it is infinitely more powerful and has the added advantage of being true. The challenge is that the story the Bible tells is not nearly as simple as the story the world tells. God's story requires thought and disciplined emotions — things we don't especially excel in at our present moment. God's story requires time to listen and learn. It requires a reckoning with the Triune God of Scripture over all his pagan competitors. It means one must be willing to grapple with the reality of sin and a gracious salvation.

There is yet another great advantage to the Bible's story, however, which is joined to its truthfulness: it is written upon the conscience of all humanity. Though sinful humanity vigorously suppresses the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18ff), it is nevertheless true that everyone has a conscience haunted by the law of God which is written on their heart — even the heart of the unbeliever (Rom. 2:12–16). That means that the conscience is a vitally important element for the church's apologetic on these matters. When we teach and preach the truth of God's design for the body, gender, sexuality, and marriage, we are touching on truths that God has written not only in his Word but in nature and upon the human conscience.

God's story is far more satisfying and consistent than the world's story. It tells us simultaneously of both the enormous worth of human individuals and their comprehensive corruption brought about by sin. It is a harder, more challenging, more complex, but infinitely better story than the one the world tells. And the better story the Bible tells is actually able to explain more. It is able to tell us what life is all about and why we are here. It is a story which explains why things are not the way they are supposed to be. And best of all, it is a story which tells how God is going to make it right again.

So pastors, preach and teach God's better story. It is true. It is powerful. It is satisfying. It is a story written upon and confirmed in nature and upon the human conscience. It is a story just waiting to be heard and believed. 

¹ Christopher Watkin, *Thinking Through Creation: Genesis 1 & 2 as Tools of Cultural Critique* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017).

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||| From the Archives |||

The Distinction between Man and Woman

At the turn of the twentieth century, Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) found himself confronted by a society increasingly hostile to human flourishing according to divine design. Sufficiently alarmed, he busied himself with a counteroffensive, which has been passed down to the anglophone world under the title, *The Christian Family*. The family was in trouble, and one of the most influential theologians of the Christian era unsheathed his pen in defense knowing it was a matter of civilizational life or death.¹

What Bavinck wrote then is just as relevant today, so in this issue on anthropol-



ogy, we share his section on “The Distinction Between Man and Woman” as an exemplary handling of biblical anthropology, which exalts in God’s good design in creating humans in his image male *and* female.²

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN MAN AND WOMAN

The following text is excerpted from Herman Bavinck, The Christian Family

Nevertheless, we can both underestimate and overestimate this distinction. The first defect often hobbled people in previous centuries. In practice people frequently viewed the woman as a being of lower order than the man, and theoretically people often denied her the status of being fully human. Over against that view, we must maintain, with the help of Scripture which alone supplies an explanation regarding the origin and essence of a human being, that both man and woman are created in God’s image, and that therefore both are human beings in the fullest sense of the term. The second chapter of Genesis presents the woman especially as a helper suitable for the man, but let us not forget that this chapter has been preceded by the first chapter of Genesis. Here we read that God created man and woman together in his image; the woman can be a helper suitable for the man only because she is his equal and reflects God’s image just as much as he does. The question that has been raised upon occasion in the past, namely, whether the woman may be called a human being, is not at all appropriate. The woman is a human being

no less than the man, because she no less than he was created in God’s image. Scripture speaks in a very human way about the essence of God, but it never transfers the sexual differentiation to him; God is never portrayed or presented as being feminine. But if the woman is said to be created along with man in the image of God, then that includes the fact that the uniqueness and richness of feminine qualities no less than those of the masculine capacities find their origin and example in the divine Being. God is a Father who takes pity on his children, but he also comforts like a mother comforts her son.

Because of this unity of human nature, then, the well-known saying is not entirely true that claims that the man is incomplete and half a person without the woman, and the woman without the man. It is true only insofar as each is viewed separately in his or her own particularity. But the expression is less correct when one thinks of human nature, which is common to both. Each of the two is complete as a person. Man and woman each have a soul and a body, a mind and a will, a heart and a conscience, a spirit and a personality. There is no single capacity of the body and no single quality of the soul that is exclusively unique either to the man or to the woman. Each of the two has a fully human nature and is a uniquely independent personality. For that reason, the question is so difficult to answer as to whether the woman possesses less of an aptitude for some activities and functions than the man. For although understanding and rationality, head and hand,

¹For more on Bavinck’s *The Christian Family*, see Colin Smother’s summary and commendation of the work in “Recovering Bavinck’s ‘The Christian Family’” in *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 3.1 (Spring 2020):8–15.

²Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, translated by Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian’s Library Press, 2012), 65–70. Used with the publisher’s permission.



undoubtedly function in a different way with the woman than with the man, that does not at all imply either a different or an inferior aptitude, and is not at all identical to inability. Related to this is the difficulty of describing crisply and clearly the distinction between man and woman. Judgments span a wide range, and it requires no artistry to arrange alongside one another the contradictory opinions of those with profound understanding of human nature.

Down through the centuries and among all nations, among philosophers and

among the unreflective masses, women haters have exchanged places with women worshippers. And men have hardly remained constant in their own judgment, but frequently move from the one to the other extreme. At one time or another, the woman is an angel or a devil, a queen or a vixen, a dove or a serpent, a rose or a thorn. The feminine is identified as divine, and then again as demonic. The man kneels before her in worship, only then to pin her under his foot. Frequently the conclusion is that the woman is a riddle; the man does not understand her, and yet he often understands her even

better than she knows herself. Nevertheless, the distinction exists, and it is set in terms of its main features as well. There is outward difference between man and woman, in terms of the body and all of its organs. Difference in the size of the head, in the development and weight of the brain, in the tint of the skin, in the growth of hair, in the shape of breast and stomach, in the form of the hands and feet. Difference also with regard to the strength and tone of the muscles, the sensitivity of the nervous system, the gracefulness of movements, the color of the blood, the flow of tears, the pulse rate, the sound of the voice, the multiplicity of needs, the capacity to suffer, the weight and strength of the body. In her entire development, the woman is closer to the child and reaches full adulthood sooner than the man.

No less important is the distinction between man and woman that exists in the life of the soul. People have said that the soul has no sexual differentiation, but even though the nature and capacities of the soul are the same for man and woman, they function in a different way. By means of observation the woman acquires sense impressions more quickly and retains them longer and more deeply than the man. Her imagination is characterized by greater liveliness and quicker connectivity. Her thinking and evaluating are characteristically more visual than analytic, attaching more value to the amenities of life than to abstract principles and rules. She seeks truth preferably along the route of an idealizing view of reality, rather than by the method of conceptual analysis. With the man, the volitional capacity is more logical, more capable of persistence, more persevering

in striving for a goal, but the woman surpasses him in forbearance and patience, in the capacities for suffering and adapting.

The human nature given to man and woman is one and the same, but in each of them it exists in a unique way. And this distinction functions in all of life and in all kinds of activity. Already the outward appearance of the woman makes an entirely different impression than that of the man, and has an entirely different significance for her than for him. Clothes and jewelry are less important for the man, but with the woman they are an important part of her life. For that reason people often call women "the fairer sex." That entails no insult, as long as it does not intend to portray the masculine sex as "the ugly sex." For just as the description of women as "the weaker sex" [1 Peter 3:7] does not imply that all forms of weakness are combined in the woman, similarly the description of women as "the fairer sex" does not imply that all beauty has been bestowed on the woman. The man is beautiful as well. Only an unhealthy school of thought relating to beauty and art acknowledges no higher beauty than that of a naked female body, time and again abusing her in various seductive and hideous poses as though she were nothing more than an ornament. Such an unhealthy school of thought also entails that people no longer have an eye for the beauty of the man. Yet, such beauty exists as well. It is a different beauty, quite surely, but of no less value. It is the beauty of loftiness that the man embodies, even as the beauty of comeliness is the possession of the woman. But both man and woman are beautiful; both display the features of the image of God in

The man is not intellectually superior to the woman, and the woman is not morally superior to the man. But how entirely different each of them takes hold of religion and morality, art and science!

which they are created.

To the man belongs the strength of physical prowess, the wide chest, the commanding eye, the full beard, the powerful voice; to the woman belongs a delicate shape, sensitive skin, full bosom, round shape, soft voice, long hair, elegant carriage, and supple movement. He engenders respect, she engenders tenderness. In terms of beauty, Michelangelo's Moses is not inferior to Raphael's Madonna. Similarly, the woman is constructed differently than the man in terms of religion, intellect, and morality. The same laws of logic and morals, the same religion and morality apply to both. The man is not intellectually superior to the woman, and the woman is not morally superior to the man. But how entirely different each of them takes hold of religion and morality, art and science! The man sees in religion first of all a duty, the woman considers it a pleasure and a privilege. For the man, the good functions more in the form of justice, for the woman it takes the shape of love. The man wants justice and law, the woman sympathy and participation. The man strives for the truth of an idea, the woman pursues the reality of life.

Accordingly, each must be on guard for a particular set of sins. The man must struggle against forcing his principles and pressing upon others every possible consequence, and the woman must wrestle continually against her deficiency in logic that is manifested both in rigid tenacity and incorrigible willfulness, as well as in a fickleness that defies every form of argument. The man is susceptible to the danger of doubt and unbelief, rationalism and dead orthodoxy, while

the woman risks no less a danger of superficial piety and superstition, mysticism and fanaticism. The loquaciousness of the woman contrasts with the incommunicativeness of the man. The vanity of the woman is no worse than the coarse indifference of the man. The infidelity of the man is matched by the stubbornness of the woman. Indeed, man and woman have nothing to hold against each other. Each has quite glorious virtues and each has rather serious defects. There is room for neither disparagement nor deification with respect to either of them. 

Unflinching at the Point of Attack

CHURCH HISTORY AND DOCTRINAL CONTROVERSY

The history of the church can largely be outlined in a history of doctrinal controversy and challenges to “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). By this we should not be surprised. The Apostle Paul himself warned young Timothy that “in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons” (1 Tim 4:1), and that “the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Tim 4:3–4). In a gut-wrenching

moment, Paul informed the Ephesians elders, “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.” From there it gets worse: “and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:29–30; see also 2 Pet 2:1). In addition to “the ignorant and unstable” who “twist” Scripture “to their own destruction” (2 Pet 3:16), Paul predicted that from the elders themselves — those tasked with teaching, leading, and shepherding God’s people — will come those who twist the Scriptures to lead away members of the flock.

Of course, this was not merely a future issue for the Apostles. The New Testament it-

self identifies false teaching as a contemporary problem, presenting the occasion for much of what is written in it. Paul contended against the Judaizers who demanded circumcision for justification (Galatians); the author of Hebrews sought to convince believers to forsake Israelite worship and to trust in the finished work of Christ; and the Apostle John warned against “false prophets” and “antichrists” — those who deny that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 4:1–3). Examples could be multiplied.

As one looks beyond the apostolic era, we see theological struggles continue as the early church became embattled in the defense of the gospel against Gnosticism, Sabellianism, Arianism, and Pelagianism, to name but a few early heresies. Each of these errors required direct confrontation, refutation in accordance with biblical truth, and a positive statement of the Scriptural position. Some of these controversies re-

sulted in distinct creedal statements, such as the Council of Nicaea (AD 325), Constantinople, (AD 381), and the Council of Chalcedon (AD 425), each intended to clarify the biblical teaching in response to Trinitarian and Christological errors.

The middle ages, as we would expect, brought no rest to this situation. The definition, nature, and leadership of the church took center stage; an intense confrontation with Islam ensued, debates over the use of icons proliferated; and, all the while, some of the older trinitarian heresies continued. The Reformation, which began as a renewal movement within the church, turned into an all-out brawl over the authority of the church, the Scriptures, and the doctrines of Christ and salvation — among others. In more recent times, the Enlightenment and modernity ushered in new challenges to the faith — those that question not only the



authority of the church or the reliability and authority of Scripture, but whether or not God even exists.

THIS ANTHROPOLOGICAL MOMENT

These modern challenges have brought us to a particular moment — an “anthropological moment” — as my *Doktorvater* wrote in the first of this series of Ancient Paths essays.¹ It was his contention that we are not only in an anthropological moment, but that the church has had prior or such moments in its history: “It would be easy to think that the church has never been in such a place before — but such a thought would be wrong. The earliest heresy which consumed much of the church’s energy, Gnosticism, was first and foremost concerned with anthropological matters.” Furthermore, as Haykin pointed out, the issues of marriage and celibacy were critical issues during the Reformation. “In other words,” Haykin argued, “our anthropological moment is not without precedent.”

In agreement with Haykin, we justifiably call ours an anthropological moment. We do so not because it is the *only* area of biblical faithfulness under fire, but because it is the place *most* under siege by our spiritual Enemy. In other words, it is the area of biblical teaching that right now, more than any other, stands as the focal point of apostasy.

There is a reason we refer to our time as an anthropological moment rather than, for example, a “Trinitarian” one. Notwithstanding your baseline trinitarian heresies

that exist in every generation, I am aware of few pastors, churches, or whole denominations that have recently descended from faithful to fallen as a result of anti-Trinitarian pressures. Yet we daily see examples of anthropological apostasy in churches and entire denominations. Meanwhile, these apostates’ orthodox Trinitarian statements remain safely intact.

Furthermore, the wider culture is not concerned about such teachings. Proving proof of concept, Ryan T. Anderson recently stated, “Amazon won’t refuse to sell your book because of your Christology or your Trinitarian theology.” But, as he knows all too well, “Amazon will refuse to sell your book” if it violates the prevailing culture’s anthropological orthodoxy.² And even more poignantly, Charlie Kirk was not martyred primarily for his orthodox beliefs in the Trinity, Christ or any other — but for his teaching on biblical *anthropology*.

C.S. Lewis creatively illustrated the foolishness and failure of misunderstanding the times in *The Screwtape Letters*, writing, “The game is to have them all running about with fire extinguishers whenever there is a flood, and all crowding to that side of the boat which is already gunwale under.” We must resist falling prey to such a tactic that would lead us to neglect the “real dangers” around us.³

EMBRACING OUR ANTHROPOLOGICAL MOMENT

It is therefore not a question of *what* mo-

ment we live in, but *how* we will live in it. This question is especially important for those who bear the responsibility to teach, write, and lead our churches and para-church institutions. I dare say that our faithfulness will be proved by whether or not we rise to meet this moment.

A quote often misattributed to Martin Luther powerfully makes this point:

It is the truth which is assailed in any age which tests our fidelity. It is to *confess* we are called, not merely to *profess*. If I profess, with the loudest voice and the clearest exposition, every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christianity. Where the battle rages the loyalty of the soldier is proved; and to be steady on all the battle-fields besides is mere flight and disgrace to him if he flinches at that one point.⁴

Our heroes of the past unflinchingly took to the battlefield at the point of attack. Athanasius defended the deity of Christ, Luther preached justification by faith alone, Tyndale translated the Scriptures, Spurgeon exposed the heresies of modernism, and Bonhoeffer opposed a genocidal dictator. These and many more demonstrated their loyalty by confronting the errors of their day and confounding them with the light of Christ. To speak more colloquially, they knew what time it was and acted accordingly (cf. 1 Chron

12:32). And they did so at great cost. Athanasius endured numerous exiles, Luther faced a death sentence, Tyndale was burned at the stake, Spurgeon was alienated, and Bonhoeffer was martyred.

It remains for us to follow in the ancient paths they trod of courage and conviction. These paths require each of us, in accordance with our giftings, calling, and station, to be willing to pay the cost of discipleship. We must be willing to endure the painful conversations, ostracization, cancellation, economic deprivation, and loss of “Respectability” among our peers. In the end, we must be willing to die (Matt 16:24–26).

Let us not be fooled. We cannot roar like a lion in every domain of theology but remain silent or whimper on those issues of greatest importance in our times and be counted faithful. The watchman must sound the warning (Ezek 3:16–21). The soldier of Christ must meet the enemy’s attack on the battlefield. Let us, then, take our stand in the anthropological battle that is raging against the church. For anything less is “mere flight and disgrace.” ×

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¹ Michael A.G. Haykin, “This Anthropological Moment,” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 1.2 (Fall 2019): 6–7.

² Ryan T. Anderson and R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “In the Library: Ryan T. Anderson,” [AlbertMohler.com](https://albertmohler.com/2025/09/24/in-the-library-ryan-t-anderson/), September 24, 2025, <https://albertmohler.com/2025/09/24/in-the-library-ryan-t-anderson/>.

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York, NY: Harper One, 2001) 138, 137.

⁴ The quote derives from a fictional work about the life and times of the German Reformer, Martin Luther. Elizabeth Rundle Charles, *Chronicles of the Schonberg-Cotta Family, By the Two of Themselves* (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead, & Company, Publishers, 1868), 321. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/36433/36433-h/36433-h.htm#XIX>.

How Science Confirms a Literal, Historical Adam and Eve

An increasing number of professing evangelical scholars and leaders doubt or deny some or all of the details about Adam in Genesis. They do so because they believe that science has proven overwhelmingly that we are related to the apes through millions of years of evolution. But is this so? And does it matter?

THE HISTORICITY OF ADAM

Genesis 1–11 is inerrant history, not poetry, historical fiction, or mythology.¹ The thirteen-fold use of Hebrew word *toledoth* (translated as “history,” “account,” or “generations”) in Genesis,² alongside the waw-consecutive, imperfect verb

¹ Even most old-earth proponents in the church recognize that Genesis 1–11 is history. See, for example, Walter Kaiser, *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant?* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 53–83.

² Genesis 2:4, 5:1, 6:9, 10:1, 10:32, 11:10, 11:27, 25:12, 25:13, 25:19, 36:1, 26:9 and 37:2.

form, shows that these eleven chapters are historical narrative. The genealogies in Genesis 5, 11, Luke 3, and the many comments of Jesus, Paul, and Peter show that Genesis 1–11 should be interpreted as literally as we do the accounts of the virgin birth, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus.³ So, what does Scripture teach about the origin of man?

THE LITERAL TRUTH ABOUT ADAM

According to Genesis 1:26–28, Adam and Eve were created on the sixth literal day of history and were uniquely made in the image of God. They were created to rule over the rest of creation. Adam was created to understand and use spoken language (Gen. 2:7–25). Adam had the reasoning ability to name animals and discern that he was alone — the only human being, until God made Eve.

Genesis 2:7 clearly states that God made Adam’s body from the dust of the ground, added the divine breath, and Adam became a “living creature” (Hebrew: *nephesh chayyah*). The same Hebrew words, *nephesh chayyah*, describe sea creatures, flying creatures, and land animals (Gen. 1:20–21, 24; 2:19; 9:9–15). They are all living creatures (though they are not made in the image of God). God did not make a living creature by natural processes over millions of years and transform that living creature into a human being. The first man, Adam, was supernaturally made from literal dust (cf. Gen. 3:19; 1 Cor. 15:45–47). Genesis 2:7 is impossible to harmonize with human evolution.

Genesis 2:22 says Eve, the first woman (Gen. 3:20), was made from a pre-existing living creature (Adam). But this was by supernatural surgery, not by any natural process.

The fall of Adam and Eve not only produced immediate spiritual death (Gen. 3:8) but also precipitated God’s judgment in initiating the process of physical death (Gen. 3:19). God also cursed the non-human creation (Gen. 3:14, 17–18; Rom. 8:18–25). In Genesis 3:15, God gave the first promise of the coming Messiah to save sinners.

³ For a scholarly defense of the young-earth view of Genesis 1–11 that is also understandable to thoughtful lay people, see the 14-author work, Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury, eds., *Coming to Grips with Genesis* (Green Forest, AR: Master Book, 2008).



Then God made coats of skin implying the first blood sacrifice as a covering for sin (Gen. 3:21), pointing to the Lamb of God (Jesus) who provides forgiveness of sin (John 1:29) for those who repent and believe the gospel.

God says that He created the earth to be inhabited by man (Isa. 45:12, 18), and that He created the heavenly bodies so man can tell time (Gen 1:14). But if the big bang theory is true, then God waited *billions* of years after He made the stars, Sun, Moon, and Earth before He made man. What kind of God would say and do this? These statements only make sense if Adam was created five days after God created the earth and two days after He made the heavenly bodies.

Referring to Genesis 1–2 in Mark 10:1–9, Jesus affirmed that God created Adam and Eve at the “beginning of creation.”⁴ Paul likewise taught that “since the creation of the world,” humans have seen the witness of creation to the existence and some attributes of God (Rom 1:20). Jesus and Paul were clearly young-earth creationists: Adam was not created billions of years after the beginning, as implied by the evolution story.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE “OVERWHELMING SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE”?

The idea of millions of years of earth history was invented in the minds of anti-Christian geologists in the late eighteenth and early-nineteenth century by using naturalistic, uniformitarian assumptions to interpret the evidence.⁵

Fossil evidence?

⁴ For a short defense of this statement, see Terry Mortenson, “But from the Beginning of . . . the Institution of Marriage? *Answers in Genesis*, November 1, 2004, <https://answersingenesis.org/family/marriage/but-from-the-beginning-of-the-institution-of-marriage/>. For a longer discussion, see Terry Mortenson, “Jesus, Evangelical Scholars, and the Age of the Earth,” *Answers in Genesis*, August 1, 2007, <https://answersingenesis.org/age-of-the-earth/jesus-evangelical-scholars-and-the-age-of-the-earth/>, which is similar to chapter 11 in *Coming to Grips with Genesis*.

⁵ See my lecture (based on my PhD research), Terry Mortenson, “Millions of Years: The Idea’s Unscientific Origin and Catastrophic Consequences” *Answers in Genesis*, August 26, 2008, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/video/age-of-the-earth/millions-of-years/>; as well as Terry Mortenson, “The History of the Development of the Geological Column,” *Answers in Genesis*, August 8, 2007, <https://answersingenesis.org/age-of-the-earth/the-history-of-the-development-of-the-geological-column/>; and Terry Mortenson, “Philosophical Naturalism and the Age of the Earth: Are They Related?” *Answers in Genesis*, March 2, 2005, <https://answersingenesis.org/age-of-the-earth/are-philosophical-naturalism-and-age-of-the-earth-related/>.

Since the discovery of “Neanderthal Man” in 1856 in Germany, evolutionists have trotted out numerous examples of fossil evidence to “prove beyond question” that we evolved from some ape-like creature over millions of years. From 1864 until recently, evolutionists said Neanderthals were a different species, *Homo neanderthalensis*. Today, many evolutionists classify them as fully human, and for many good reasons. They made sophisticated spears and tools, jewelry, glue, boats, flutes from bear femurs, and homes from animal skins. They painted cave art, used fire to cook, cared for their sick, and ceremonially buried their dead. Genetic and anatomical evidence indicates they could speak, and they interbred with modern humans.⁶

“Piltdown Man” was announced in 1912 as an ape-man who lived 500,000 to a million years ago. In the following decades he was discussed in 500 scientific papers⁷ and presented as evidence of human evolution in the famous “Scopes Evolution Trial” in 1925.⁸ But in 1953 “Piltdown man” was exposed as a deliberate hoax concocted by some of the leading scientists in Britain.

In 1922, Henry Fairfield Osborn (director of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, 1908–1935) declared to the public that “Nebraska Man” was an ape-like ancestor based on a single fossil tooth! But in 1927, after more fossil evidence was discovered in Nebraska, it was quietly revealed (in a technical journal) to be from an extinct species of pig.

In 1970, in commenting on the Piltdown hoax, the prominent evolutionist Lord Solly Zuckerman declared,

Students of fossil primates have not been distinguished for caution when working within the logical constraints of their subject. The record is so astonishing that it is legitimate to ask whether much science

⁶ See Marvin Lubenow, “Neanderthals: Our Worthy Ancestors,” in Terry Mortenson, ed., *Searching for Adam: Genesis and the Truth about Human Origins* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2016), 263–286.

⁷ Glen Levy, “Top 10 Shocking Hoaxes,” *Time* (2010 March 16), https://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1931133_1931132_1931125,00.html.

⁸ Regarding that farcical trial that made a fool of a leading old-earth creationist, see Terry Mortenson, <https://christoverall.com/article/concise/the-1925-scopes-evolution-trial-why-it-matters-100-years-later/>, July 18 2025.

is yet to be found in this field at all. The story of the Piltdown Man hoax provides a pretty good answer.⁹

In 1974 “Lucy” was declared to be a “missing link” ape-woman. But compelling evidence, recognized by even some evolutionists, shows that she and other *Australopithecines* are 100% apes.¹⁰

In 1993, in a review of an evolutionist book on human origins, Chris Stringer, another world-famous evolutionary expert on the subject said,

The study of human origins seems to be a field in which each discovery raises the debate to a more sophisticated level of uncertainty True to the traditions of the field, the arguments swirl around the questions of the correct classification of the fossils and of the presumed relationships between the species of humans and pre-humans.¹¹

From 1997 to the present, Dr. Carl Werner and his wife have visited 122 natural history museums and universities all over the world. They have photographed thousands of original fossils and interviewed over 100 leading evolutionists about the evidence for evolution, and especially the evolution of man. What they discovered was a trail of false claims, hidden evidence, manipulation of the evidence, fraud, and sharp disagreement among evolutionist experts. Anyone who thinks the scientific evidence for human evolution is strong needs to consider Werner’s revealing interviews and photos of the actual fossil evidence. The world has been deceived.¹²

Genetic evidence?

Like the fossil evidence, genetics also confirms Genesis

⁹ Solly Zuckerman, *Beyond the Ivory Tower* (New York, NY: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1970), 65.

¹⁰ See David Menton’s illustrated lecture, “Lucy: She’s No Lady,” *Answers in Genesis*, August 11, 2015, <https://answersingenesis.org/media/video/evolution/lucy-shes-no-lady/>. The late Dr. Menton was a respected human anatomy medical professor (Washington University School of Medicine) and expert on the claimed fossil evidence for human evolution.

¹¹ Chris Stringer, Book review of *Origins Reconsidered: In Search of What Makes Us Human*, by Richard Leakey (Doubleday, 1992), *Scientific American* (May 1993), 88.

¹² See The Grand Experiment Video Series, especially video episodes 3–8 on human evolution at <https://www.thegrandexperiment.com/video-series>.

Dr. Jeffrey Tomkins . . . carefully analyzed the published genomic data and concluded that the genomes of humans and chimps are only about 85% the same.

and refutes evolution. For many years the media and science magazines have told the world that the DNA of chimpanzees and humans “are nearly 99 percent the same.”¹³ But to arrive at that percentage, evolutionists did not compare the whole genomes of chimps and humans and used the human genome as a structural framework (which thereby *assumed* ape-to-human evolution is a fact).

But in 2016, Dr. Jeffrey Tomkins (geneticist at the Institute for Creation Research) carefully analyzed the published genomic data and concluded that the genomes of humans and chimps are only about 85% the same.¹⁴ In May 2025, in the prominent journal, *Nature*, evolutionists confirmed that percentage as a result of mapping the whole genome of apes without using the human genome as a template.¹⁵

Dr. Tomkins and Dr. Nathaniel Jeanson (genetics expert at Answers in Genesis) have also shown that genetics confirms that all humans are descended from just two humans and the mutation rate in the human genome confirms the biblical timescale for Adam, not the evolu-

¹³ Elizabeth Kober, “Skin Deep,” *National Geographic* (April 2018), 32–33.

¹⁴ Jeffrey P. Tomkins, “Analysis of 101 Chimpanzee Trace Read Data Sets: Assessment of Their Overall Similarity to Human and Possible Contamination With Human DNA,” *Answers Research Journal* 9 (2016): 294–298, <https://answersresearchjournal.org/analysis-chimpanzee-trace-read-data-sets/>.

¹⁵ DongAhn Yoo et al., “Complete sequencing of ape genomes,” *Nature*, 641:401–418 (2025 May 8), <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-025-08816-3>.

tionist timescale for the first *Homo sapiens*.¹⁶

DOES IT MATTER WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT ADAM?

The biblical and scientific evidence overwhelmingly exposes the lie that humans evolved from some ape-like ancestors over millions of years. The account of Adam and Eve in Genesis is literally accurate history. They were created supernaturally only a little more than 6000 years ago.¹⁷

The Bible's teaching about Adam and Eve is critical to right thinking about gender, marriage, abortion, racism, and the authority of Scripture.¹⁸ The myth of millions of years of animal disease, death, and extinction and other natural evils before Adam undermines the clear biblical truth about the original very good creation, the cosmic impact of the Fall, and the future redemption of the creation at the return of Christ and thereby assaults the character of God.¹⁹

Many old-earth creationists affirm a literal, historical Adam but accept the billions of years. This reflects an

inconsistent hermeneutic, as I have shown elsewhere.²⁰ Christians should reject *all* old-earth views, not just theistic evolution.²¹

Most importantly, Adam is foundational to the gospel message of salvation. He brought sin and physical and spiritual death into the human race. But Jesus, the last Adam, came to give spiritual life and ultimately resurrected physical life to all those who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord (Rom 5:12–21; 1 Cor 15:20–28, 42–50). We have no gospel without the last Adam. But we can't have the gospel with the first Adam either. Let God be true, but every man a liar (Rom 3:4)! 

¹⁶ Nathaniel Jeason and Jeffrey P. Tomkins, "Genetics confirms the recent, supernatural creation of Adam and Eve," in Terry Mortenson, ed., *Searching for Adam: Genesis and the Truth about Human Origins* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2016), 287–330.

¹⁷ In *Searching for Adam*, sixteen experts defend the literal truth about Adam biblically, theologically, historically, paleontologically, genetically, anatomically, socially, and morally.

¹⁸ Mortenson, *Searching for Adam*, 459–501, <https://answersingenesis.org/adam-and-eve/adam-morality-gospel-and-authority-of-scripture/>.

¹⁹ Terry Mortenson, "The Fall and the Problem of Millions of Years of Natural Evil," *Answers in Genesis*, July 18, 2012, <https://answersingenesis.org/theory-of-evolution/millions-of-years/the-fall-and-the-problem-of-millions-of-years-of-natural-evil/>.

²⁰ See my 20,000 word critique of Wayne Grudem's critique of theistic evolution: Terry Mortenson, "Theistic Evolution: A Response to Wayne Grudem, Making the Same Errors He Opposes in Others," *Answers in Genesis*, February 17, 2021, <https://answersresearchjournal.org/theistic-evolution-response-grudem/>. For a shorter 3,000-word summary, see Terry Mortenson, "Wayne Grudem's Seriously Inconsistent Opposition to Theistic Evolution," *Answers in Genesis*, <https://answersingenesis.org/creationism/old-earth/wayne-grudem-inconsistent-opposition-theistic-evolution/>.

²¹ See my lecture, Terry Mortenson, "Did God Create over Millions of Years?" *Answers.tv*, August 26, 2024, <https://www.answers.tv/videos/did-god-create-over-millions-of-years>.

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PETER J. GENTRY

A FORUM

On the Image of God

PETER J. GENTRY | ALASTAIR ROBERTS
ERIK THOENNES | VERN S. POYTHRESS

On the Image of God

What, in a nutshell, is the image of God? In the past, a majority of Christians have taken the view that since God is invisible (John 4:24), humanity does not resemble God physically, but rather in terms of morality, personality, reason, and spirituality. This interpretation is inadequate because it is not based on the linguistic meaning of the fundamental text in Genesis 1 according to its ancient Near Eastern background:

²⁶ And God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky



and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Let us immediately notice two things: (1) the grammar in Hebrew makes plain (as the translation above shows), that "ruling" is a *result of the image* and not the essence of the image; (2) the last two clauses of v. 27 are *comments* on the first sentence "God created man in his own image" and prepare the reader for the commands given in v. 28 (a) to reproduce and (b) to rule. The literary structure is as follows:

God created mankind in his image according to his likeness:

A in the image of God he created him
B male and female he created them
=====

B' be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth
A' and subdue it
and rule over the fish/birds/animals

Thus, binary sexuality (i.e. duality of gender) is the basis for being fruitful, while the divine image is correlated with the command to rule as God's regent. These observations from the literary structure are crucial. They are decisive in showing that the divine image is *not* to be explained in terms of the duality of gender in humanity.

We are now in a position to explain the meaning of the clause in 1:26a, "let us make man in our image, according to our

likeness." First, "the image of god" in the culture and language of the ancient Near East in the fifteenth century B.C. would have communicated two main ideas: (1) royalty and (2) sonship. The king is the image of god because he has a relationship to the deity as the son of god and a relationship to the world as ruler for the god. These relationships would have been understood as *covenantal relationships*. We ought to assume that the meaning in the Bible is identical or at least similar, unless the biblical text clearly distinguishes its meaning from the surrounding culture.¹ Second, this corresponds well with how Moses is using these terms in the creation account. In what follows, the exegetical microscope will focus on (1) the meaning of the words "image" and "likeness," and (2) the exact force of the prepositions "in" and "according to."

LIKENESS AND IMAGE IN THE BIBLE

The word "image" in Hebrew and Aramaic always refers to a physical image or statue in all but two instances, which are abstract and nonconcrete.

The word "likeness" is apparently synonymous, but focuses on how something compares, is like, or resembles the original. It is never used of a statue.

Although "image" and "likeness" are synonyms, each word carries a slightly distinct emphasis. The word "likeness" focuses on the *relationship* of the copy to the original while the term "image" focuses on how the copy *represents* the original

to others. This is quite clear in the Bible in Ezekiel 23:15, the only other place besides Genesis where the two words occur together.² Moreover, the commentary in Psalm 8 consistently employs royal language to explain Genesis 1:26.

The ancient Near Eastern data correspond to the use in the biblical text. The word "likeness" in Genesis is closely associated with the creation of the human race, human genealogy, and sonship. It occurs in Genesis 1:26 in the creation of humans and again in 5:1, when this is recapitulated under the heading "Birth History of Humankind." The third use is in 5:3 with the generation of Seth. Luke 3:38 interprets the "likeness of God" in Genesis to indicate that Adam is the son of God. Israel inherits the role of Adam and Eve and is specifically called the son of God (Ex 4:22, 23).

Ten times prior to Genesis 1:26 we are told that grasses or fruit trees produce according to their kind or that God created creatures according to their kind. The implication is first that Seth belongs to Adam's kind as a human being; and second, that some kind of kinship exists between humans and God.

THE PREPOSITIONS "IN" AND "AS" OR "ACCORDING TO"

What is the exact force of the prepositions? In spite of the fact that the two prepositions are close in meaning, we must not assume that the meaning is identical. The best linguistic research reveals that the preposition *bē* = "in" indicates locative nearness or proximity while the preposition *kē* = "as"

or "according to" emphasises something similar, yet distal and separate.

Putting the nouns and prepositions together, humans closely represent God in image, i.e., they represent his rule in the world. Humans are also similar to God in performing the action of creating human life, *but not in the same way*. Thus *bē* (in) emphasises a way in which humans are closely like God, *kē* (as, according to) a way in which humans are similar, but distinct. This interpretation also explains the reversal of the prepositions in Genesis 5:3. Seth shares precisely in the matter of generation and sonship, but is only similar and not identical in the representation of his father's image.

The biblical account is both similar and different from the ancient Near Eastern context.

In Egypt, only the king is the image of god. In the Bible, all humans constitute the image of God. The covenant relationship between God and man is not restricted to an elite sector in society. The image applies to both male and female, since *ādām* is generic. Moreover, since the image describes the product and not the process of creation, it is ontological and structural, not just functional. We are hard-wired for relationship with God and with all creatures.

SUMMARY

Humans have been given an absolutely unique place in creation. Genesis 1:26 defines a divine-human relationship with

¹ For a more in-depth treatment of the ancient near Eastern background and its correspondence with the creation account in Genesis, see Peter Gentry, "Humanity as the Divine Image in Genesis 1:26-28" *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 2:1 (Spring 2020), 56-70; Peter J. Gentry, "Humanity as the Divine Image in Genesis 1:26-28" in *Biblical Studies*, Vol. 1 by Peter J. Gentry (Peterborough: H&E, 2020), 1-23.

² These two words also occur in the ancient Near Eastern Tell Fakhariyah Inscription, a ninth century B.C. Aramaic text. In the Inscription the word "likeness" focuses on the king as a suppliant and worshipper of his god and communicates sonship while "image" focuses on the majesty and power of the king in relation to his subjects.

two dimensions, one vertical and one horizontal. First, it defines human ontology in terms of a covenant relationship between God and humans, and second, it defines a covenant relationship between humans and the earth. The relationship between humans and God is best captured by the term (obedient) sonship. The relationship between humans and the creation may be expressed by the terms kingship and servanthood, or better, servant kingship. This is supported by Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3 where Paul is describing the restoration of a covenant relationship with God, not faculties in humanity where we are like God.



ALASTAIR ROBERTS

On the Image of God

God's determination to make mankind in his image introduces the climactic creative act in the creation account of Genesis 1. That mankind would be so characterized, both in the declaration of divine intent of verse 26¹ and in the statement of their creation in verse 27, suggests its importance for an understanding of human identity and purpose. Unsurprisingly, the concept of the image of God has become a central one for theological anthropology, being appealed to in support of human dignity and equality.

The primary sense of the image of God is

that of mankind as an appointed authority and symbol of God's own rule, a sense more clearly seen in the blessing and commission of verse 28: mankind is to engage in transformative labour in the creation, taming and ordering it, filling and glorifying it, bringing it under his sway and representing God's authority within and over it. In this, mankind would follow the pattern of God's own creative labour, by which he formed and filled the world. Man would also come to act on earth in a manner comparable to the divine council in heaven, within which angelic beings serve as priests of the heav-

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¹ The first person plural cohortative form of "let us make" in verse 26 has been variously interpreted. Many Christians have interpreted it light of the Trinity, whereas others have understood the plural form to be one indicative of fullness or majesty. A further possibility, which I find attractive, is that God is here speaking as the head of the heavenly council, in a manner akin to that of Isaiah 6:8 or 1 Kings 22:19-23 (cf. Gen 11:7). While God alone creates mankind, he does so as the Lord of hosts, establishing mankind in a manner that manifests and reflects his divine sovereignty and which parallels the ruling assembly of heaven upon the earth. The implicit presence of the divine council is also hinted at in Genesis 3:5 and 22, which refer to man becoming like *gods*, rather than like God, in knowing good and evil; in taking the forbidden fruit, mankind sought to become like one of the gods of the divine council, claiming an authority for himself for which he was not yet ready.

only temple, as king-like powers and authorities, and as prophetic council members and bearers of the word of the Lord.

There is a threefold parallelism in Genesis 1:27:

- A. 1) God created 2) man 3) in his image
- B. 3) in the image of God 1) he created
- 2) him
- C. 3) male and female 1) he created
- 2) them

This is not mere repetition: it discloses something of the multifaceted character of humanity. Man is first spoken of as a singular entity ("him") and then as a plurality ("them"). Humanity is a kind, a race, and a host. The unity of humanity is seen in the representative figure of Adam, who as the first and father of mankind can stand for all: in him humanity as a kind is seen. Humanity is also a race, expanding generation after generation into a multitude of families from the union of the first pair.

Mankind is created male and female. The duality and polarity of male and female is part of what constitutes the image — mankind is created with two halves or two sides that are counterparts of each other. This duality is not mere diversity, difference, or even sociality as such, but the specific mutually implicating and procreative disjunction at the heart of humanity. No other human difference has quite this character. The male and femaleness of humanity is essential for the fruitfulness with which humanity is blessed. Likewise, the broader human vocation is one that is characterized everywhere by the fruitful interplay of the differences between the sexes, not merely between married pairs but across



humanity more generally.

A filial sense to the image of God might be hinted at in Genesis 5:3, within which Adam fathers Seth "in his own likeness, after his image." To be created in the image of God is in some sense to be a "son of God." While this sense of the image of God has implications for every human being (e.g. Gen 9:6), its meaning comes to more focused manifestation as figures like David are elevated to the exercise of royal authority (2 Sam 7:14). David expresses this exalted place given to man in Psalm 8:3–6:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet...

When the author of Hebrews takes up these verses in chapter 2 of his epistle, relating them to Christ, we see their meaning focused on Christ's representative rule as the last Adam, and our participation in him. Christ, who is the Image of God (Col 1:15), is the archetype and ground of mankind's image-bearing.

While the reality of mankind's being created in the image of God is most clearly manifested in a figure like the king, it would be misleading to think that the king has a greater share in the image of God on that account. Rather, he re-presents and ministers something that is a common gift

to all mankind. Something similar can be said about Paul's claim that man "is the image and glory of God" in 1 Corinthians 11:7. While this seems more closely to associate men with the image of God, Paul's point is that men more particularly symbolize and re-present this common standing of mankind to itself, not that they more fully possess it. The logic is akin to that of the gift of the Spirit to the whole body in the chapter that follows and the re-presentation of that one Gift in the manifold and variegated gifts of the Spirit: such gifts are not the measure of a person's participation in the one Gift, which is the common possession of all members of the body, both collectively and severally.

When Paul speaks of the restoration of the image of God in Colossians 3:10, it is the unified body of the Church in which it primarily occurs. The restoration is social in character: as Christ is all in all, his grace overcomes all fleshly oppositions, his pattern of life unites everyone, and the body of the new humanity is deepened in the knowledge of God.



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On the Image of God



From conception, all human beings are equally created in God's image. The image of God provides our core ontological reality that makes us more like God than anything else in all creation. As image bearers, we have a distinct and glorious calling to represent and reflect that image for God's glory (Gen 1:26–27). We all reflect the image of God in varying degrees and ways, but no one is more or less created in God's image. Every human being is unique and possesses wonderful particularity in personhood and is fearfully and wonderfully made by an awesome Creator (Ps 139:13–17).

There is an inherent limitation in being made in God's image, in that we are not identical to him. But there is also an amazing amplification in that we are a reflection



of who God is, having been created to live as his created analogy. The image of God enables us to ground our worth, dignity, and purpose in our essence rather than our function. This means it is humans *as humans* — not some element or ability in us — that constitutes the divine image.

The image of God in humanity is distorted but not lost in the fall and is the basis for human dignity and biblical ethics (Gen 9:6; James 3:8; Matt 22:37-40, 1 John 4:20-21). We see the image of God displayed in humanity through things like our moral understanding and accountability, abstract reasoning, spiritual composition, immortality, and our ability to relate to God. These manifestations, however, do not define the image but display it in varying ways. We are defined by the image of God in our essence, not by any functional expression of that image.

Jesus perfectly shows us what the image of God in humanity looks like. He is the image of the invisible God in true human form (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15, Heb 2:17). This perfect image is fundamentally seen in his perfect fellowship with the Father, perfect obedience to the Father's will, and sacrificial love for others. In these activities he perfectly fulfills human purpose. Jesus perfectly fulfills the Creation Mandate to rule over and subdue creation and to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:28). He perfectly fulfills the Great Commandment by always abiding in the Father's love (John 15:9), and by loving humanity to the point of death (John 15:10, 13; Heb 5:8-9). Because Jesus is our perfect example of humanity, he is our example in all things, and we should pattern our lives after him (Mark 12:13-17; 1 Pet 2:21). This means we experience our humanity most truly

when we're in right relationship with God.

Every human being who has ever been created, regardless of any earthly limitations or fallenness, is deserving of profound dignity, value, respect, and protection (2 Cor 5:16). This truth is at the core of why Christians are commanded to love, even those who hate us and our enemies. Due to being made in God's image, our lives have eternal meaning and significance, and we are motivated to live lives that can glorify God and have an impact into eternity through the way we live.

The image of God gives us a basis for the way we view everyone — including ourselves. It also transforms the way we think about everything else. It is at the very core of our understanding of ethics, morality, education, government, parenting, anthropology, art, sports, economics, sexuality, mental health, work, recreation, sleep, marriage, and of course, worship. The Christian view of the world is grounded in who God is, and who we are as the pinnacle of his creation which displays his glory (Ps 19:1). 

VERN S. POYTHRESS

On the Image of God

“What is the image of God?” For me, this is not an easy question. Why? It has to do with how language works. God teaches us in the Bible primarily through whole sentences and paragraphs, not by words or phrases taken by themselves.¹ This short article focuses on an elementary level.

Let us start with the word “image.” Roughly speaking, “image” means a display that is similar to and reflects an original. “Image of God” means a display reflecting God. That is the meaning. By itself it does not say very much. We have to look

to additional passages. Some people expect that these passages will provide clues enabling us to uncover a secret precise meaning hidden within the key phrase by itself. But it does not work that way. Each passage provides meaning in the *whole* passage.

Consider Genesis 1:26-27. It indicates that God created man to be *like* God and to display God on a creaturely level. Genesis 1-2 and Genesis as a whole show that the resemblance of man to God consists not in one feature, but in many features that are holistically integrated in

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¹ Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (rev. and expanded ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); Vern S. Poythress, *Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God: A Handbook for Biblical Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), chaps. 14 and 17; Vern S. Poythress, *Making Sense of Man: Using Biblical Perspectives to Develop a Theology of Humanity* (P&R Publishing, 2024), 100-107.



humanity. Human beings imitate God by speaking, exercising dominion, working, thinking, having personal communion, and being holy.

Then there is Colossians 1:15. The divine Son is “the image of the invisible God.” The Son displays and reflects God the Father (see also Heb 1:3). His relation to the Father is behind his role in creating the world. According to 1 Corinthians 11:7, man also is “the image of God.” But man is not God. How do

Colossians 1:15 and 1 Corinthians 11:7 fit together? “Image of God” is *not* “one thing,” with identically the same reference across all the verses of the Bible where similar phraseology occurs. It is a mistake to smash the passages together on the basis of a shared word and related ideas. The Son is the eternal original image of God. That is the background pattern within God, according to which God made man in his image.

Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10 are

discussing spiritual renewal, so that Christians conform to the pattern of Christ. The renewal is not identical with the Adamic state: Christ is not Adam. There are relations between all these passages. God intends for us to see these relations. Renewal in Christ takes place in a manner analogous to God’s original creation of Adam. And God’s original creation of Adam takes place in analogy with the Son as the eternal Image. The common pattern goes together harmoniously with the distinct nuances that belong to each passage. The distinctions add to and enrich the teaching of the whole Bible.

In the history of theology, the phrase “image of God” is sometimes used as a technical term. There is nothing the matter with technical terms. But technical terms need to have their meanings defined. In this case theologians disagree. A theologian may build into the technical term his perspective on what is central to humanity. Then this perspective is read into the key biblical texts. But from a methodological point of view, technical terms in theology must be distinguished from the occurrence of ordinary, nontechnical words and phrases in the Bible. A technical term is meant to have a single, precise, fixed meaning, while the Bible uses God-given common words in a range of ways. The Bible can also use more than one choice of words to construct expressions that make similar points (for instance, Col 1:15 compared to Heb 1:3).

The whole Bible teaches about humanity. It has much to say. God made man male

and female, in original innocence and holiness. He called them to have fellowship with God, to hear his voice, to respond to him, to love him, and to reflect his character on a creaturely level. They rebelled. God continues to create all the individuals who come into the world, to govern their lives, and to be present in their lives (Psa 139; Acts 17:28). Christ came to save those who have faith in him, to renew them, and to restore fellowship with God. Salvation comes to completion in the new heavens and the new earth. The key to human existence is to know God through Jesus Christ (John 17:3). The more we grow in knowing God and having communion with him, the more we become what he designed us to be. God transforms us into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18), so that we reflect God.² 

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² See Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God’s Appearing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018); Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018).

The Constitution of Man:

An Examination of Monism, Dichotomy, and Trichotomy

THE CONSTITUTION OF MAN

The question before us concerns the constitution of man. Is he exclusively material? Merely immaterial? Or a combination of material and immaterial parts? One can affirm monism, which is the view that man is simply one part. He is either composed of matter — materialistic monism (only matter) — or is purely immaterial — immaterialistic monism or idealism.¹ Those who hold that man is composed of two parts argue that man is material and immaterial. Or to use more common parlance: he has a body and a soul. Finally, there are those who hold that man is composed of one material part, the body, and two immate-

rial parts, soul and spirit. Those who hold that man is composed of two parts (body and soul) are called dichotomists whereas those who hold that man is composed of three parts (body, soul, and spirit) are called trichotomists. In this article, I argue man's powers, activities, and objects of knowledge require a body and soul but not a spirit as a third constitutive part — thereby affirming dichotomy

This conclusion is not arrived at through the presentation of a taxonomy of views where the strengths and weaknesses of each position are listed and then weighed. Taxonomic approaches often treat positions devoid of their attendant



philosophical or theological coherence and fail to provide readers with criteria by which certain views may be judged. One might assume that the proper starting place, then, is Scripture which contains God's authoritative teaching on the nature of man. I wish, however, to develop this position by examining the reader of Scripture in the act of reading. Reading involves objects that are material, such as letters, and immaterial, such as universals and arguments, which in turn require material and immaterial activities of the human person that correspond to the material and immaterial objects in order for them to be known. In short, you need a body and soul to fol-

low the argument I am making. Material and immaterial activities require material and immaterial powers, such as are found in the body and soul. These things must be true in order for you to be able to read Scripture. In fact, Scripture assumes these truths.

This method of reasoning follows the Reformed theologian, Francis Turretin.² He writes, "That the soul is spiritual is not proved better than from its operations, which indicate *a posteriori* the kind of principle whence they spring. If they are spiritual, the soul itself also must be spiritual."³ He also argues for the immateriality of the soul by examining the spiritual

¹ Here, I follow Joshua Farris' scheme as opposed to contemporary theologians, such as Millard Erickson, who equate monism and materialism. See Joshua Farris, *An Introduction to Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020) 250n52; Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998), 543–544.

² One may also find this method of reasoning in Steven Jensen, *The Human Person: A Beginner's Thomistic Psychology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2018).

³ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, *First through Tenth Topics*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), V.xiv.11. Henceforth, *IET*.

and incorporeal objects upon which the soul acts along with its mode of operation, which is apart from a bodily organ despite its initial dependence upon the body.⁴ The ability to discern what is, such as a body or soul, by working from objects to activities to powers is possible, according to Turretin, because “the mode of operating follows the mode of being.”⁵ In other words, a particular thing has certain powers by which it operates as manifested in activities that are directed toward certain objects. This is the order of being. But, as Turretin reminds us, the order of knowing is the reverse of the order of being, *a posteriori*, which means we must work from objects to activities to powers. I will follow this pattern as we examine the reader of Scripture.

I begin with the body to argue against immaterialistic monism that reading is an embodied experience, which is followed by an argument for the soul in order to understand what is read contra materialistic monism. Finally, I explain how man’s spirit should be understood in relation to his soul, which is a debated reading of Scripture.

AN EMBODIED READING OF SCRIPTURE

Reading is an embodied act. Minimally, your eyes see the white pages of Scripture with black, and sometimes red, letters. Your hands reach out to grab the Bible, and you feel the thin pages of paper that you turn time and time again as you mine

the treasures contained on each page. If you read out loud, you will hear the word of God with your ears. You might enjoy coffee or tea while reading in the early hours of the morning because these drinks help awaken your body as you enjoy the fragrance and taste of your beverage. If you are anything like me, you likely have Bibles with special meaning to you, possibly because they have been in the family for generations. These Bibles often bring to mind memories of loved ones whom you watched pour over the pages of that sacred text.

The careful reader will note that I have listed the five external senses: sight, touch, hearing, smell, and taste. The four internal senses of the body have also been employed in this act.⁶ These senses are the synthetic sense, imagination, memory, and estimative power. The synthetic sense is that which brings unity to our sense experience. The eyes know the Bible as black and the hands know the leather as soft and the synthetic sense knows all these things are true of your particular Bible.⁷ The imaginative sense is the ability to recreate this scene in the eye of your mind as you gather all these images from your experience and put them together in a picture. If conjuring up these images is directly associated with a past event you experienced, it is the work of the memory. The estimative power, or what may be called instinct, is the knowledge of that which is useful or harmful, which is why you often grab

that warm beverage so useful for your reading experience.

Clearly, you have a body. The experience of reading described above demonstrates the various objects, activities, and powers associated with a material body. Only a philosopher or politician could try to convince you not to believe your lying eyes. But some philosophers, such as George Berkeley, will go further and argue that you don’t even have eyes! Berkeley maintained that all reality is mind dependent and he denied the existence of material substances. Berkeley held to a kind of monism because he affirmed the existence of the soul and denied the

existence of the body along with all material reality. Accordingly, man cannot be composed of an immaterial part and a material part if matter does not exist or is reduced to the perception of an immaterial substance.

There are good reasons to reject Berkeley’s immaterialist monism. First, it runs contrary to the description of reality provided above. We necessarily engage a material world. Material reality impinges upon our senses. Christ wore a crown of thorns and had nails driven through his hands. Saints of old were stoned to death. Reality contradicts idealism. While this might seem lacking in philosophical re-



⁴ Turretin, *IET*, I.xi.3; V.xiv.12, 13, 21.

⁵ Turretin, *IET*, V.xiv.12.

⁶ For a helpful explanation of these terms, see Edward Feser, *Immortal Souls: A Treatise on Human Nature* (Neunkirchen-Seelscheid: Editiones Scholasticae, 2024), 66–68.

⁷ The synthetic sense is sometimes called “the common sense,” but this differs from what we often refer to as common sense. Common sense often refers to a body of knowledge typically associated with the ability to make the right decisions necessary for everyday life. However, “the common sense” is that sense or power that enables one to synthesize the experience of their external senses. In order to avoid confusion, I chose to follow Feser’s work and employ the language of “the synthetic sense.” See Edward Feser, *Immortal Souls: A Treatise on Human Nature*, 66.

flection to some, denying it runs contrary to the path of wisdom.

Second, idealism depends upon the principle that “to be is to be perceived.”⁸ This principle places idealism on the horns of a dilemma. Either it begs the question in favor of the immaterial world as opposed to the material world, or it is consistently applied and eliminates the spiritual world for the same reason since it cannot exist apart from the subject’s perception.⁹

Third, Christians should reject idealism because it contradicts Scripture and the Creedal tradition. The Apostle John speaks of seeing, hearing, and touching the resurrected Christ (1 John 1:1–5). Scripture, like all men for all time, assumes the reliability of sense perception. Further, Christians confess that they believe in the resurrection of the body. Idealism undermines the common experience that Scripture assumes and purports views incompatible with the Scriptural

and Creedal affirmation of Christ’s resurrection from the dead along with all who follow him on that resurrection morning. For these reasons, immaterialist monism should be rejected.¹⁰

AN IMMATERIAL UNDERSTANDING OF SCRIPTURE

Materialistic monism is more common than the immaterialistic monism supplied by Berkeley. Although different from its immaterial counterpart, this view also cannot account for the reading of Scripture. Note, I am not saying that it cannot make sense of the data of Scripture itself or account for key doctrines such as the intermediate state or the resurrection of the dead. I am merely asserting that it cannot account for reading. To reiterate, I am asserting that to even read demands a dichotomist account of the human being. This is a much smaller claim and is philosophical rather than theological.¹¹

What about reading requires an imma-

terial soul? As we saw above, reading at least requires a body with the proper external and internal senses, ruling out living substances with vegetative souls, such as trees. But can dogs and cats read? They possess these same senses. Do beasts with sensitive souls possess the capacity to read or is there something distinct about humans that enables them to read because they have rational souls?¹² Again, the answers seem obvious. Your dog, Fido, is not presently looking over your shoulder tracing the flow of the argument, nor will Fido write an angry letter to the editor complaining about the claim that he cannot read.

The argument that man has an immaterial intellect is the same argument that explains why Fido cannot read. Reading requires the power of reasoning and this power is immaterial, having no material organ by which it operates. Thus, the principle of this power must be immaterial.

This leads to two questions. What is reasoning and why must it require an immaterial principle? These questions will be answered together. The power of reasoning consists in three actions: (1) apprehension, (2) judgment, and (3) reasoning properly so-called. In the act of apprehension, the human abstracts universals from the particulars that are known in the senses. For example, Christians confess that Jesus is truly man. Understanding man-ness does not arise from some prior knowledge one has about the nature

of humanity but is discerned when one encounters man. One need not know every man or even have seen the incarnate Lord to understand what it means that Jesus is truly man. One simply needs to know what “man” is. Abstracting “man-ness” from particular men enables one to form the concept of man not confined by particularity and materiality, such as Jon, 6’ 1”, brown hair, blue eyes, 185lbs, etc. This concept formed in the man is not an image, but a distinct and clear understanding of the essence of man.¹³

The mind then moves to judgment. No judgment is rendered upon understanding. For example, “man” in the proposition, “Jesus is truly man,” is neither true nor false. However, the statement, “Jesus is truly man” may be either true or false because multiple concepts are joined together, such as “Jesus” and “man.” In this instance, it is true. Jesus is truly man. These notions of “Jesus” and “man” are combined in reality even though they are separated in our thought.¹⁴

This leads to the third act of the mind, which is properly called reasoning.¹⁵ In this act, the mind joins propositions one to another in the form of argumentation as we seek to understand the causes of truth or falsity. For example, one could reason as follows:

Jesus is truly man.
Men have bodies and souls.
Therefore, Jesus has a body and a soul.

⁸ *Esse est percipi.*
⁹ For related arguments against idealism, see, R. P. Phillips, *Modern Thomistic Philosophy: An Explanation for Students. Vol. 2: Metaphysics* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Bookshop, 1962), 59–64.



¹⁰ The language of vegetative, sensitive, and rational souls is a common division among living substances. The affirmation of vegetative or sensitive souls is not an affirmation of their immortality since the life of these souls depends completely upon matter. The rational soul, it will be argued, does not depend wholly upon matter for its operations and is thus counted as immaterial and, by way of further argumentation, immortal. See John Gill, *A Body of Divinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1971), 271–72.

¹¹ On the difference between a concept and an image, see Feser, *Immortal Souls*, 69–91.

¹² Jensen, *The Human Person*, 155.

¹³ Jensen, *The Human Person*, 156.

This line of reasoning discerns the causal relations and dependence of each true premise in relation to the conclusion.

In the act of reading, the person employs the external and internal senses of the body to discern material and particular realities that are then understood by the intellect according to their essence and truthfulness. In conceptualizing the essence of a particular thing, the intellect understands universals. Humans know not merely something external to them but they know that thing as true and they know they know it as true. Then, the causes of its truthfulness are understood through argumentation.

In this, the intellect is operating apart from a bodily organ. These acts cannot be reduced to material processes. Matter is always particular and universals are immaterial, therefore they must be known by an immaterial power. Discerning the truth of a proposition requires one to engage in an intellectual activity whereby they separate in thought ("Jesus" and "man") what is joined in reality. Reason proper understands causation, rather than the mere knowledge of association often found in animals, wherein humans understand the answer to the "why" question. This power of reason manifests itself in the activity of reasoning that takes for its object immaterial reality.

Thus, the act of reasoning in humans is not merely quantitatively different than that of animals, such as Fido, nor is it material. The immateriality of the intellect is

required for reading, a distinctly human act, and thus rules out the possibility of materialistic monism.

A DEBATED INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

Up to this point, we have established that we have a body and a soul. Man is constituted of at least two constitutive parts. But now, we must ask if there is a third part to man, namely, his spirit. As we reason from objects to activities to powers, we note that no reason exists to argue that the spirit is a constitutive part in man distinct from the soul. The soul in its act of reasoning knows immaterial truths as it operates with a power distinct from its material body. For this reason, there must be a soul. If the spirit was a third constitutive part, it would take for its object immaterial reality as well, but this is the object of the soul. This activity would be found in rationality and operate by an immaterial power, but this is the work of the soul. Thus, there is no reason to suppose that the spirit exists as a third constitutive part. The spirit does not have a different object, activity, or power than the soul. Therefore, man is not composed of a spirit in addition to his soul and body. For this reason Christians should affirm dichotomy rather than trichotomy.

When Christians affirm dichotomy, they stand on good historical ground. First, this view is widespread throughout the history of the church.¹⁶ Second, Apollinarius reasoned that the Son assumed a human soul and body but had a divine

spirit.¹⁷ The church rightly identified his views as heresy and affirmed that Christ assumed a true body and a reasonable soul. Stated simply, Christ assumed a human nature constituted of two parts.

Christians also stand on good exegetical ground when they affirm that man is composed of a body and soul.¹⁸ Clear passages in Scripture assert that from creation (Gen 2:7) and in death (Matt 10:28) man is a body and a soul. Commenting on Matthew 10:28, John Murray writes, "It is obvious that 'soul' is used here in a metaphysical sense. Our Lord is basing his exhortation and consultation upon the differentiating properties and relationship of the two entities. The soul is not subject to the destructive assault that may be brought to bear upon the body."¹⁹ Matthew 10:28, along with 1 Corinthians 7:34 and 2 Corinthians 7:1, present readers with a metaphysical description that is also comprehensive. To read them otherwise raises absurd questions. Can man harm my spirit? Is my soul to be cleansed? Murray rightly argues that these texts must present us with a comprehensive view of man, saying, "If it were otherwise, the whole purpose would be defeated. In the case of Matt. 10:28 the completeness of penal destruction is the main lesson, and in 1 Cor. 7:34 and 2 Cor. 7:1 it is the completeness of sanctification that is envisioned. But in one case body and soul are deemed a sufficient specification, in the other body and spirit. If an integral component were omitted, the complete-

ness would be negated."²⁰ Scripture presents us with a metaphysical and comprehensive view of man by affirming that he is body and soul.

How then should one interpret key texts, such as Hebrews 4:12 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23, that appear to support trichotomy? First, the reader should bring the philosophical, theological, and exegetical reasoning to bear upon their interpretation.²¹ These texts should be interpreted in light of the foregoing arguments. In doing so, one avoids the error of denying the metaphysical and comprehensive nature of the previous texts. Should a reader deny the above arguments in favor of trichotomy, then they must provide a clear distinction between two immaterial and simple substances that each possess their own power, activities, and objects while avoiding the heresy of Apollinarianism as they maintain a minority position in the church.

Second, one should point out the problems with a trichotomist reading of these texts. Hebrews 4:12 would be rendered meaningless because one need not split constitutive parts. On a trichotomist reading, it would make just as much sense to say "soul and body" as it does "soul and spirit." Yet, the language of the text leads one to conclude that what is being divided is already one.²²

This does not mean that the language of "spirit" is meaningless. Instead, it provides

¹⁶ Stephen Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 297–299.

¹⁷ Readers interested in an exegetical defense of dichotomy contra trichotomy should read John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 2: Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 23–33.

¹⁸ Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 2: Systematic Theology*, 19.

¹⁹ Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 2: Systematic Theology*, 25.

²⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 188.

²¹ Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 2: Systematic Theology*, 30–31. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 188.

¹⁶ Readers interested in a brief historical introduction to these two views and the prevalence of dichotomy should consult, Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Second Edition (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2021), 2:185–189.



key insight into the nature of man's rational soul. This language rightly directs our thoughts to the origin, operation, and order of the soul. The spirit of man is from God, not the earth. It does not derive from matter nor does it depend upon matter for its continued existence after death, but returns to the One who gave it (Ecclesiastes 12:7; John 19:30).²³ In this way, the rational soul of man differs from the vegetative souls of plants and the sensitive souls of animals. When the soul is described as a spirit, the Scriptures emphasize that the soul of man differs from the souls of animals in their operation. The intellect of man takes for its object that which is spirit, or immaterial, as opposed to that which is material. That which is from God and knows immaterial reality by its operation is also ordered above the beasts of earth and is to consider those far greater angelic spirits and contemplate the "most pure

spirit" (John 4:24; 1 Tim 1:17).²⁴ Man's rational soul elevates him above all creatures of the earth and is the kind of soul made for communion with God. Because man is a spirit, he is to lift his head upward to cry out with the angelic spirits, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts" while contemplating the marvelous truth that "the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isaiah 6:3).

CONCLUSION

Man is comprised of a body and soul as evidenced by powers, activities, and their objects. Neither immaterialistic nor materialistic monism can account for the act of reading Scripture. Material reality impinges upon our external and internal senses and cannot be reduced to perception. The solution, however, is not materialistic monism which cannot act for

the immateriality of the intellect demonstrated in the act of reading as man comprehends universals, judges propositions, and discerns causes — all of which require an immaterial power not dependent upon a bodily organ. Finally, one need not add the spirit as a third constitutive part. Philosophical and exegetical reasoning mitigate against this view along with its rejection in church history. Instead, the spirit ought to be understood as a description of the origin, operation, and order of man's rational soul. Man has a body and soul. X

²³ The conclusions here affirm creationism as opposed to traducianism and the existence of the human person by his subsistent soul in the intermediate state. It is consistent with the claim that man will be joined to his body in the resurrection of the dead.

²⁴ The language of "most pure spirit" is from the 1677/89 Second London Baptist Confession of Faith 2.1.

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The Nature of the Soul and Evangelism



PREPARED FOR CHRIST

Louise Perry, the author of the recent book *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, announced on a podcast in September 2025 that she is now a Christian.¹ For a number of years she has served as one of the most eloquent secular critics of the sexual revolution.

At only 33 years of age, she represents a resistance to the sexual revolution rapidly growing within some youth subcultures. Some young people are rethinking not only the transgender movement, but also the sexual revolution which birthed it. As Ryan T. Anderson recently said on R. Albert Mohler's "In the Library" podcast, anthropology

is the central spiritual battleground in America today.² People in the broader world are not debating Christology, trinitarian theology, or even the doctrine of Scripture. It is the nature of man, especially the sexuality-related components, around which controversy swirls. Anderson noted that writing a book about the Trinity will not get your book banned from Amazon.com, but writing a book against the transgender movement might (Anderson's book *When Harry Became Sally* was banned

God in many ways and are now ready for the healing balm of the gospel. At the same time, the Christian view of nature and reality is being proved to be the true and genuine account of reality. And, this proclamation of the goodness and order inherent in God's world is a way of fostering cultural circumstances favorable to gospel ministry. Louise Perry is an example of that. On the podcast where she announced her conversion she said this about Christianity: "I realized that if it were supernaturally true, you would ex-

pect it to be sociologically true. And observing quite how sociologically true it is was very persuasive to me and I know it has been to others as well." Studying these issues led to her being mugged by reality. The Christian teachings about life are better for human wellbeing than any other option. The best explanation for that is that the whole teachings of Je-

¹ Macdonald-Laurier Institute Podcast, September 11, 2025. <https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/its-time-to-complicate-the-wests-account-of-progressivism-louise-perry-and-peter-copeland-for-inside-policy-talks/>.

² R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "In the Library: Ryan T. Anderson," September 24, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7igTQjRIPkQ>.

Louise Perry was prepared for Jesus by Christian ethical teachings about sex

sus are true. Louise Perry was prepared for Jesus by Christian ethical teachings about sex. As James R. Wood recently posted on X, the “reality-respecter to Christian pipeline is real.”³

THE EXISTENCE OF THE SOUL

Which brings me to the topic of this piece: the soul. Discussion of the soul is out of vogue in mainstream academia, since Christianity has been replaced by the new paganism of progressive ideology. Academia is comfortable talking about the mind, since on their account the mind can be considered part of the natural world. But the soul makes people uncomfortable. “Minds” feel sanitized and respectable, but the soul hearkens back to a different time. If souls were to exist, then perhaps angels and dragons and all sorts of wild things might also. More stringent naturalists seek to reduce even the mind to something non-material on these same grounds.⁴

This, of course, is precisely one of the cultural reasons we must talk about the soul. For, every man knows he has a soul, an immortal soul created by God and accountable to God for what it does. Our souls long for eternity and recognize a future state of either bliss or suffering. John Calvin identified this yearning for transcendence as one of the chief markers of the human soul. He writes, “In short, the many pre-eminent gifts with which the human mind is endowed proclaim that something divine is engraved upon it; all these are testimonies of an immortal essence” (*Institutes I.XV.2*). As we seek to renew culture and transform it in a more Christian direction, foregrounding the soul should take a central place.

Scripture speaks often about the soul, though it does not give us a packaged theory about its nature and powers. From the moment of man’s creation it is clear we

have both bodily and body-transcending aspects to our being. Genesis 2:7 describes the creation of the man in this way: “Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.” Here we learn that man possesses a dual nature: we are at once both dust and God-breathed life. We are a single thing, a man who is a living creature, with two aspects, the bodily and the living.

Traditional Christian theology articulates this idea by saying that man is a combination of soul and body.⁵ Calvin writes, “Furthermore, that man consists of a soul and a body ought to be beyond controversy. Now I understand by the term ‘soul’ an immortal yet created essence, which is his nobler part” (*Institutes I.XV.2*). We are not merely a soul temporarily attached to a body (like a piece of luggage on an airplane), nor are we merely a body without a more ephemeral and higher aspect (like a battery-powered machine). We are both body and soul — dirt and breath. The soul is our nobler part, for it more directly images God in his holiness and wisdom.⁶ But, the body is likewise part of the goodness of creation, not to be denigrated. Though the Apostle Paul yearns to be free from the body (Rom 7:24), he is speaking of the body in its fallen and corrupted condition, not the state of embodiment as a whole. While the soul can survive without the body, it is created in order to be in a body. For this reason our future state is not one of disembodied union with God, but rather a comprehensive union that will take place in the body. The church confesses that we await “the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.”⁷

A more complete biblical theory of the soul is a challenging endeavor. Scripture utilizes a range of different terms to talk about the non-physical aspect of our being: spirit, heart, mind, etc., in both Hebrew and Greek.

THE SOUL-BODY RELATIONSHIP

Traditional Christian thought sees two distinct ways of talking about the relationship of soul and body, ways that today go under the headings of Substance Dualism and Hylomorphism. Substance Dualism argues that the soul and body are distinct substances, or distinct things, each capable of existing on its own and possessing a distinct essential nature. The great strength of this view is that it can explain the significant differences between the soul and body. Being different things, they naturally have different powers. The challenge for this view is to explain how the person is unified as one being rather than existing as two distinct beings (the body and the soul) which interact with one another in an orderly fashion. How is a human any more a unity than two books side-by-side on a shelf: two different things which happen to be in close proximity to one another? Explaining how the human is a single entity, not just with a duality of nature or aspect, but a duality of *things*, is the challenge of this position.

The French philosopher René Descartes is perhaps the most well-known substance dualist in the tradition. In his revolutionary philosophical works he argued that matter is merely extension, and therefore

³ James R. Wood, X Post, September 26, 2025, 4:09 p.m., <https://x.com/jamesrwoodtheo/status/1971608091398754379>. Wood invented the phrase in his article “Evangelicals Must Stop Their Preferential Treatment of the Left,” *First Things*, July 18, 2024.

⁴ See, for example, Paul M. Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

⁵ Theologians refer to this view of mankind as “dichotomy.” See the essay above (pp. 48–57) by Drew Sparks for more on this topic.

⁶ See Calvin’s Discussion in *Institutes I.XV.3–4*.

⁷ This is the final statement in *The Apostles’ Creed*.

that body in its essential nature is merely extended being. The soul, in contrast, is non-extended, and therefore exists as a non-material being with its distinct powers of knowing and acting. In Meditation 6 of his *Meditations on First Philosophy* he argued that these two distinct substances are very closely united and, “as it were, commingled with one another” so that the two form a single thing. An extended thing can obviously “commingle” with a non-extended thing only in a merely metaphorical way, or at most through psycho-somatic causal laws that interrelate the two. But, it shows that even the most stringent substance dualists seek to do justice to the unity of the human person.⁸

The hylomorphic view of the soul argues that the soul is not a separate substance from the body, but rather is itself the form of the body. This view is strongly couched in Aristotelian metaphysics (the dominant metaphysics of the medieval and reformation eras), utilizing Aristotle’s distinction between form and matter. For Aristotle, every substance that exists has both material stuff out of which it is composed and a formal structure that makes that stuff be the kind of thing that it is. A statue is composed out of a certain material (e.g., bronze, marble) shaped into a particular organization (a statue). The statue is not merely the marble or the bronze — that very same matter could be organized into a different form (a platter

or a table) and would be a different kind of thing. A human body is composed out of flesh, blood, bone, etc., as its matter, but that matter is organized into a human life. The same biological material could be arranged as other kinds of living things, say dogs, cats, and other animals, since they have the same kind of material components. But their matter is organized not as human, but with the form of a dog or a cat. According to the hylomorphic view, the form of a living thing is its soul. The soul makes that particular thing to be the kind of thing that it is by making it alive and having the distinctive powers of that kind of life.

Traditionally, this has meant that all living things possess souls, not merely human beings, though only human beings have souls that are rational. Dogs have doggy souls, oak trees have oak tree souls. Why? Because they are all alive. Every living thing has nutritive and procreative powers. Animals also have perceptual powers. But, only humans have rational souls capable of thinking, knowing, or acting with free choice. But, all plants and animals are alive. Their essential form — what it is to be them — is to be a living being and so they possess the principle of life within them: soul. Human beings possess a unique kind of life, of course, because we are rational.⁹

In their historical form, both the Substance Dualist and the Hylomorphist acknowledge that rational activities go beyond the physical. The Hylomorphist, like the substance dualist, argues that when we grasp concepts, understand essences,

perform mathematical calculations, and make free choices, we are engaging in an activity that is in an important sense disembodied. While digestion and perception happen in the body and are mediated by bodily organs like stomachs, intestines, eyes, and ears, the rational activities of thinking and choosing happen without a corresponding physical part. While the brain is obviously very important for human consciousness and the activities of the mind, still it makes sense to talk about how our minds might be able to think even if our brain were destroyed. It is very difficult to talk about how we might digest without a stomach or intestines, or how we might perceive objects without having an organ of perception. Reason, unlike the other powers of the human soul, is truly incorporeal. The Substance Dualist takes this to be powerful evidence in his favor, though the Hylomorphist thinks his own view can accommodate it.

Without resolving this issue, we might note how each view offers potential strengths in thinking about our cultural moment. The substance dualism view emphasizes the uniqueness of man in nature. We have a unique differentiator, a soul, that makes us totally different from the natural substances around us. This soul makes us in God’s image, bearing God’s creative mark, and points us toward a higher calling and destiny. We are not merely dust, we are sons of God being called back to God himself.

The hylomorphic view still makes humanity unique in our rationality, but emphasizes how we are part of a unified and

⁸ For a recent defense of substance dualism see chapter 11 of J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003).



⁹ For a recent defense of the hylomorphic view, see Ed Feser, *Immortal Souls* (Neunkirchen-Seelscheid: Editiones Scholasticae, 2024). Some “Scotistic” hylomorphists argue we also need a personal individuator in addition to our matter and our human form. See, for example, Tom Ward, *Ordered By Love: An Introduction to John Duns Scotus* (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2002), Ch. 6.

orderly creation. Man is not mere will or free choice, but is part of God's created order, subject to the same laws of nature and part of the same network of forces as the rest of creation. Though unique in our rational powers, we still came from dust and from dust we will return (Gen 3:19).

THE ORIGIN OF THE SOUL

Christians have also debated the question of the origin of the soul, with two well-known camps emerging over time. One camp, the Creationists, argue that each individual soul is created directly by God. While the body is produced by the union of the parents, through the mingling of their seed, the soul is created immediately by God. Each individual soul thus involves a supernatural creative act in bringing it into being. The alternative camp, the Traducians, argue that just as the body is generated by the union of the parents, so also the soul. Each of our souls, then, is something that we receive through a process of natural generation from our parents in the ordinary course of nature and is not separately created by God and infused into the body.

One strength of the Traducian view is how it explains the heritability of original sin. If the soul of the parents produces the soul of the children, it is easy to see how the original sin of the parents is inherited by the children. We receive our corrupt human nature from our corrupted parents. On the Creationist view, God seems to have to create the individual soul as a corrupted thing. In addition to the theological worry of making God the author of evil, the view also has to explain how we can inherit our original sin.

Nevertheless, the majority Christian view has been that of Creationism. Reformed theologian Francis Turretin offers a three-fold argument in favor of the Creationist view: from creation, from Scripture, and from natural reason.¹⁰ In the creation of Adam, we see God directly creating Adam's soul as he breathes life into the body. He writes, "the origin of our souls ought to be the same as Adam's." Second, scripturally, there are a wide range of passages that teach the unique creation of the soul. Zechariah 12:1 speaks of the Lord "forming the spirit of man within him." Hebrews 12:9 contrasts our earthly fathers with God who is the "Father of spirits." Turretin arranges more than a dozen scriptural references which strongly drive toward the Creationist view. Rationality, Turretin argues that the immortality of the soul points to the necessity of immediate creation. If the soul was generated by human parents, coming into being from the union of the matter contained in the parents' seed, then likewise when the body is dissolved in death the soul would be destroyed. But, the testimony of Scripture and reason is that the rational soul is immortal, being in itself simple and not composed of parts. Hence, Creationism.

PREPARING THE WAY

Like the Substance Dualist view, the Creationist view emphasizes the unique nature of man's soul as well as its source in God. Man is not a mere part of nature, but the object of God's special love, care, and even creative act. While other things may be produced by secondary causes through God's ordinary providence and conservation, human souls are special, individual

products of God's direct creative activity. Mankind truly is beloved of God. On the other hand, the Traducian view emphasizes the organic unity of man across time and place. We are part of the fabric of the created world, unique to be sure, but still enmeshed in the forces within the story.

The best of both views seeks to recognize certain fundamental scriptural truths: we are a duality of dust and spirit. We are both part of a finite, historical created order and yet we are a truly unique part of it. We are subject to corruption in our bodies, but we also somehow transcend our finitude with our minds, grasping things beyond the material. We are meant to live well in this world and the next, but we can only do that if we unite with our transcendent, loving, Creator and Redeemer God.

Can philosophy help in this endeavor, and can a rehabilitation of the natural help prepare for the supernatural? I will let Herman Bavinck have the final word. He writes:

The idea and existence of God, the spiritual independence and eternal destiny of the world, the moral world order and its ultimate triumph — all these are problems that never cease to engage the human mind. Metaphysical need cannot be suppressed. Philosophy perennially seeks to satisfy that need. It is general revelation that keeps that need alive. It keeps human beings from degrading themselves into animals. It binds them to a supersensible world. It maintains in the awareness that they have been created in God's image and can only find rest in God. General revelation pre-

serves humankind in order that it can be found and healed by Christ and until it is. To that extent natural theology used to be correctly denominated a "preamble of faith," a divine preparation and education for Christianity. General revelation is the foundation on which special revelation builds itself up.¹¹

¹⁰ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, First through Tenth Topics, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), V.13.

¹¹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), Vol 1, p. 322.

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The Christological Arc of Man's Original Goodness



It has never been more important for the church to know and speak the truth in love regarding the original goodness of humanity. No previous generation has pushed up against the basic questions of human identity and dignity with so many confused and contradictory responses. In fact, a tragic irony marks our society's point in history: we have never been so focused on humanity yet so wrong about it. And that holds a two-fold significance for the church. We need a robust understanding of what Scripture teaches about humanity for the sake of both our worship and our witness.

More specifically, our society (and many around the world) is witnessing the consequences of rejecting God's goodness in the *imago Dei* and replacing it with an *imago hominis* of our own creation (see Rom

1:22). Such a *humanistic* worldview, especially in the last few decades, has brought our culture to the end of a long trajectory of *dehumanization*. There are many reasons for that. But underlying them all is a loss of the truth and significance that God created man in his image as the climax of making all things "very good" (Gen 1:1–31).

In this article, we will look briefly at the current anthropological confusion and then consider how the doctrine of man's original goodness sets us on the road of anthropological clarity.

ANTHROPOLOGY AT THE CROSSROADS

What does it mean to be human? Is humanity basically good or bad? Is being human fixed or changeable? Is humanity

progressing or declining? Can one individual or group be more or less human than others? Is being human really that much different than being a mere animal? Should we press beyond human *being* itself?

All of these (and more) are open questions, because our society and its leaders and institutions are confused and conflicted regarding the identity, purpose, and dignity of humanity. For centuries after the Enlightenment, different worldviews — from rationalism to evolution to nihilism — have clashed with the biblical view of man. Even worse, many today are committed to specific ideologies that seek to denigrate or destroy humanity, whether in principle, by action, or at least as a necessary consequence. Whether abortion, human trafficking, critical race theory, gender identity and confusion, certain uses and effects of artificial intelligence, the justification and even celebration of violence and murder, or euthanasia and assisted suicide — underlying many of the most significant anthropological issues of our day is a deeply flawed understanding of human being.¹

The church must remain clear and confident regarding the truths of Scripture. The ideas and ideologies at work in the sometimes subtle but powerful cultural catechesis have been pressing in on the beliefs and practices of the church from

the beginning.² For our generation, the focal point of that pressure is the very nature of humanity. To the extent the church loosens or loses its grip on the original goodness of man, the church will become just as confused and conflicted as the culture around it. We are called to extend God's saving grace by speaking the truth in love to build up the church (Eph 4:11–16). We are also called to do good to others as we have opportunity (Gal 6:10), which includes speaking the truth that extends God's common grace (see Gen 9:8–17; cf. Rom 13:1–10; 1 Pet 2:13–17). Both require careful and faithful attention to Scripture.

Indeed, we have come to the anthropological crossroads of confusion and clarity. To move forward in the truth and goodness of God, we need an anthropology "from above"³ that is governed by the whole of Scripture and its self-presentation, which is centered in Christ. And that starts with Adam and Eve in the Garden.

MAN'S ORIGINAL GOODNESS

In the beginning, God made Adam and Eve as his image bearers in completion of his work of creation, which he then called "very good" (Gen 1:31). After each divine act in the sequence of creation, God saw that the light, land, vegetation, heavenly bodies, living creatures in the sea and air, and living creatures on the land were "good" (Gen 1:4, 9, 12, 18, 21, 24). Each

aspect of creation was both free from any defect and qualitatively good, being both pleasing to God and rightly ordered according to his design and purposes. But it was God's creation of man as his image to rule over the rest of creation that intensified the goodness of each part and made the whole of God's work exceedingly ("very") good. To that end, God blessed the first human beings, provided abundantly for them, and commanded them to cover the earth with his image (Gen 1:28–31).

Moreover, man's original goodness included moral goodness (Gen 1:26–27, 31; cf. Ecc 7:29). God made man *as* his creaturely images on the earth *for the purpose* of representing God to his creation and ruling over it on God's behalf (Gen 1:26–28).⁴ That is, every human being — man and woman, adult and child — is a creaturely analogue of God himself, made as an ontological representative to extend God's righteous rule over all of his creation.⁵ Thus, being and functioning as the *imago Dei* entailed that God designed human nature with all of the faculties, capacities, inclinations, and character to be/bear God's *analogical* image (cf. Col 3:9–10; Eph 4:22–24).⁶ This original righteousness, then, was also free from any defect and was qualitatively good, being both pleasing to God and rightly ordered according to his design and purposes.

In short, man's original *goodness* posi-

tioned him at the pinnacle of God's "very good" creation, where he would enjoy God's own, divine goodness in a unique, intimate, and eternal fellowship reserved for his image bearers. And man's original *righteousness* equipped him to execute God's plan for humanity to display God's glory in a godly dominion over the rest of creation.

CHRIST'S NEW GOODNESS

The original goodness and righteousness of humanity is fundamental to biblical anthropology. Yet even when God rested on the seventh day to enjoy the splendor of his glory reflected in all that he had brought forth out of nothing, he was not finished with man. The first human beings were created good according to God's original (and only!) plan, which pointed toward the designed *telos* of all human beings. The original nature and purpose of the first Adam in the Garden set the course for all mankind across all times and locations. Scripture presents Jesus Christ as the last Adam and *terminus* of a typological trajectory that spans the biblical storyline (see Gen 9:1–7; 12:1–3, 15:1–6; Rom 5:12–21; Col 1:15–20; cf. Heb 2:5–15).

To that end, the divine person of the Son became *the man* and *the image of God* as a man by assuming a human nature. He is the *essential* image of God according to the divine Son's personal subsistence in

¹ As used in this article, "human being" refers to the basic existence and kind of being that is designed by God and held in common by all humans, regardless of characteristics that differentiate one or some from others.

² Take, for example, the Christological confusion that re-emerged even with a long and rich tradition of Christological orthodoxy. See Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ, Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 35–106.

³ This is part of the church's larger task of doing all theology "from above." In general, this means recognizing Scripture as the inerrant and authoritative revelation of God above, by which he addresses things here below, which is the practical corollary to the magisterial authority of Scripture. In contrast, theologizing "from below" finds its primary source of information not from the Creator but in his creation.

⁴ For the creation of man "as" (not just "in") God's image, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 222–235 ("man rules as a result of being made as the divine image ..."); Michael A. Wilkinson, *Crowned with Glory and Honor: A Chalcedonian Anthropology*, Studies in Historical and Systematic Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2024), 59–61; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 2: God and Creation*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Baker Academic, 2004), 554–555.

⁵ It's crucial to note that the *imago Dei* does not violate the Creator-creature distinction, but still enables the human creature to represent the Creator in human being itself.

⁶ This is also supported by the general theological axiom that economy reveals ontology because ontology governs economy (see Matt 7:18; John 8:44).

the divine nature. He became the perfect *analogical* image of God according to the same divine Son's personal subsistence in a complete and sinless human body and soul. It is because he is the image of God in such fullness that the glory of God is seen in the glory of Christ (see 2 Cor 4:4–6; cf. Col 1:15–20; Heb 1:3). Thus, while Adam was the first historical instance of humanity, Christ is the archetypal image after which the rest of humanity is fashioned. The man Christ Jesus reveals the *telos* of human *being* precisely because he is the *protos* of humanity.⁷

And this means that the man Christ Jesus has his own original goodness and righteousness that is parallel to but distinct from Adam's condition before the fall. As with the first man, the human nature of the man is free from any defect and is qualitatively good, being both pleasing to God and rightly ordered according to his design and purposes. And like the “man of dust” (see 1 Cor 15:8), the “man of heaven” has all of the faculties, capacities, inclinations, and character to be/bear God's analogical image. The quality and *habitus* of every part of his human soul was perfectly aligned with God's character and will.

Unlike the first Adam, however, this last Adam was not affected by the fall, because his human nature was not inherited but created for the Son's incarnation. This last Adam was not merely “able not to sin,” he was truly “not able to sin.” The impeccability of the divine person of the Son ensured that the *original* righteousness of the man Christ Jesus resulted in *actual* righteousness in perfect human

obedience to the Father (see John 5:19, 30; 6:38; 8:28–29; 12:49–50; 14:10; Phil 2:8; Heb 5:8–9). Consequently, it is this man who now enjoys perfect fellowship with God and rules over heaven and earth in perfect righteousness (see Psa 110:1; 1 Cor 15:20–28; Eph 1:20–22).

Thus, we see the true nature, design, and purpose of human *being*, not by looking back to Adam, but by tracing the typological trajectory he started all the way to its fulfillment in Christ.

SIX ANTHROPOLOGICAL THESES FOR THE ROAD

Based on the Christological arc of man's goodness, here are six anthropological theses that will help us think carefully and biblically about what it means to be human as we take the road of anthropological clarity.

1) *Sin, defect, and death are alien to original humanity.*

We are and always will be finite and have creaturely limitations. But man was created as originally good and righteous. What we experience now is the result of original sin and the curse of total depravity. As a consequence of God's just condemnation, Adam's progeny suffered a qualitative deficiency of the soul.⁸ Guilt for Adam's sinful rebellion was imputed to all mankind, so death spread to all mankind (Rom 5:12–14). Moreover, the corruption of sin was inherited by all mankind, which affects every aspect of man. He remains the image of God, but that image is corrupted.

⁷ See Wilkinson, *Crowned with Glory and Honor*, 58–63, 221–229.

⁸ See Geerhardus J. Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 2: Anthropology*, trans. and ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 55 (“lack of something that should be there”).



Every human being after the fall begins with a *habitus* or disposition that is inherent in (not as) the substance of the soul, making it alienated from, opposed to, and hostile toward God (see Gal 5:16–24; cf. Rom 8:4–8; 1 Cor 2:14).

2) *Estrangement from God is abnormal for humanity.*

Modern and post-modern culture would have us believe that there is no God, or at least we can't know him and/or don't need him. But nothing could be further from the truth. God does exist as the Creator. As his creatures, we are completely dependent upon him for all things. And he has created us to know him. But even more, human fellowship with God is a necessary part of what makes his creation "very good." The exile of Adam and Even from the Garden did not change that. Original sin is extensive. But because it is qualitative and not substantive, the presence of original sin does not entail the redesign or repurposing of God's image bearers.

3) *There is no higher position of significance and dignity on earth than being human.*

Contrary to the popular evolutionary worldview (and others), we are not mere animals. And there is nothing in all creation beyond humanity that can compare. Every human being is the very image of God. Each is crowned with glory and honor (Psa 8:3–9) to rule over all other creatures for God's glory and honor. This means that while we may act in ways that are more or less in accord with God's design and purposes, human beings cannot be separated into groups of more and less human. And the worldviews and ideolo-

gies that conflict with these truths are ultimately destructive and dehumanizing.

4) *There is no greater or more painful tragedy on earth than fallen humanity.*

The original goodness and righteousness of man makes the reality of original sin a creation-wide catastrophe. All of creation suffered under God's just condemnation of fallen humanity. All that was once "very good" was subjected to futility and corruption until the reign of a new humanity (see Rom 8:19). Even more, fallen humanity forfeited the right and ability to rule over creation in righteousness and now suffers under Satan's tyranny (see Eph 2:1–3). Rather than lower our view of human beings and increase either our apathy or hostility, this truth should secure our compassion, humility, and gratitude for the variety of God's gracious provisions.

5) *Renewal and restoration of fallen humanity is found in Christ alone.*

Sinful humanity is not truly progressing, no matter how much technology and other gifts of common grace might make it appear so. The design and goal of humanity is to be qualitatively good, both pleasing to God and rightly ordered according to his plan and purpose, and to walk in actual righteousness as his image bearers. But original sin makes that impossible outside of Christ. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. In this salvation, grace does not cooperate with fallen human nature because every aspect of the soul is opposed to and hostile towards God (Eph 2:1–3). Neither does grace perfect human nature in the sense of building on what remains of original righteousness after the fall. Rather,

grace first produces faith in Christ. And by this same grace, God progressively restores man as his image on the earth and renews his nature by conforming him to the man and the image of God (see Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:17–18).

6) *The hope of a glorified new humanity in Christ is on the horizon.*

The pain of broken relationships, financial hardships, health problems, violence and death, and all the other suffering caused by original sin is very real. But as Paul tells us, the suffering of this present time is not worthy of comparison with the glory that is to be revealed to us when those in Christ are fully conformed to his image (see Rom 8:18–23, 28–30). On that day, we will rule with Christ without even the presence of sin. And that day is coming with the return of Christ.

LOOKING AHEAD

Of course, there is much more to say about an anthropology "from above." But we cannot say any less if we are to take the road of anthropological clarity. And as we continue to reflect on the Christological arc of original goodness and the corpus of biblical anthropology, we can take fresh courage in knowing that the Spirit of Christ is still teaching and leading the church of Christ to know and confess the truth, all for our good and God's glory. 

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Escaping Eschropolis: Masculinity and Femininity on the Silent Planet

C.S. Lewis was arguably one of the greatest minds of the twentieth century, and he bequeathed on the world a great literary treasury.¹ Many readers first encounter Lewis the Christian apologist through his inimitable work *Mere Christianity*. Others discover Lewis the children's author in his enchanting Narnia series. These two projects often act for the adventurous reader as a kind of wardrobe into Lewis's vast bibliography, a journey that rewards any who take the time to explore this wonderfully rich world. But readers who spend any sustained time ruminating on this great mind are sometimes surprised to encounter Lewis the "complementarian."

The claim that Lewis was a "comple-

mentarian" is obviously anachronistic, because the term itself was coined by conservative evangelicals in the 1980's, decades after Lewis's death. The term was coined to describe a movement that defines itself over against another movement known as "egalitarianism," which has intellectual headwaters that were active in Lewis's day. The simplest definition of a complementarian is one who believes men and women are created equal by God in His image, yet with important differences that make a difference for how we live. Specifically, complementarians believe that God's good design for us as male and female informs the Bible's instructions regarding leadership in the home and the church, and to defy either

is to defy the created order, or what Lewis refers to as the Tao (more on this below). Gender egalitarians, on the other hand, tend to downplay and flatten male-female differences, to the point that these differences have little bearing on how we live at home, in the church, and in society. In a word, egalitarians believe men and women are socially interchangeable — a concept that Lewis himself vehemently opposed in his lifetime. This theme shows up in a surprising number of places across his literary corpus.

To put a fine point on it, Lewis believed that men and women are wonderfully equal yet beautifully distinct, and he had a lot to say about God's design for men and women. He also had a lot to say about how we should live according to and not contrary to God's good design. Hence, Lewis the "complementarian."

What was it that Lewis encountered in the early-twentieth century that made him so attuned to this theme? In short, he was alarmed by the rapid erosion of true masculinity and femininity in modernity. While it is impossible to reconstruct in this space the exact cultural and ideological currents he observed, it does seem that Lewis was responding to a burgeoning feminism that was affecting traditional norms in society and even in the Church of England. He also understood some forms of feminism's connection to social and political Marxism, which was making inroads on the continent and even in his own Great Britain. Whatever he encountered, he prophetically addressed many of these cultural trends in his writing — at times even presciently in light of just how far off the rails things have

gone today. But even Lewis could not have anticipated the gender confusion facing the West today downstream of the very confusion he encountered in his day.

ESCAPING ESCHROPOLIS

Only the most diehard Lewis devotees will likely recognize the allusion embedded in the title of this essay. It is drawn from Lewis's first book as a Christian believer, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, which is an allegory of Lewis's own intellectual pilgrimage to the faith in the same vein as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.² Toward the beginning of the book, John, the main character, who is an autobiographical representation of Lewis, finds himself in the city of Eschropolis, a name that literally means something like the "city of filth and obscenity." In the subtitle of this section of the book, Lewis breaks the allegorical fourth wall when he describes the setting, "The Poetry of the Silly Twenties." This subtitle helps orient the reader to what Lewis had in his sights for critique. But what is it about Eschropolis that deserves such an ugly name? Lewis describes Eschropolis as a city inhabited by "the Clevers," who sit around all day consulting together and performing increasingly obscene and absurd routines for one another. These acts scandalize John, but after each performance the "Clever" respond positively to the performances, exclaiming, "Priceless!" The last of these routines witnessed by John is performed by one named "Glugly" who, to quote from the book,

... waddled to and fro with her toes pointing in. After that she twisted herself to make it look as if her hip bone was out of joint. Finally she

¹ This essay is adapted from a lecture originally delivered to the Oxford C.S. Lewis Society in Oxford, England at the invitation of Dr. Michael Ward.

² C.S. Lewis, *Pilgrim's Regress*, Wade Annotated Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 41.

made some grunts, and said:

"Globol obol oogl ogle globol google gloo," and ended by pursing up her lips and making a vulgar noise such as children make in their nurseries.

Understandably confused, John confesses to the Clevers that he doesn't understand any of it. Revealingly, one of them replies snidely to him, "that is because you are looking for beauty." Another chimes in, "It is the expression of a savage disillusionment." And still another provides a more meta reflection: "Reality has broken down."

All of this causes John, who is on a journey to find out what will fulfill his innate eternal longing, to object, knowing what he seeks cannot be this. His objection elicits accusations from the Clevers, "Puritanian! Bourgeois!" (an overt dig by Lewis at Marxism). Others scream back at John, "We are the new movement; we are the revolt! We have got over humanitarianism! And prudery!"

At this, John gets up to run away, and Lewis concludes scene:

And all the dogs of Eschropolis joined in the chase as he ran along the street, and all the people followed pelting him with ordure, and crying: "Puritanian! Bourgeois! Prurient!"

This last epitaph is especially humorous considering it is obvious his opponents who are the ones obsessed with sexual matters, not John.

In sum, Eschropolis is a decadent place full of disillusioned ne'er-do-wells who have sworn off beauty and even reality itself. But what is most interesting for the

purposes of this essay is how Lewis describes the inhabitants of Eschropolis at the beginning of this scene:

the girls had short hair and flat breasts and flat buttocks so that they looked like boys: but the boys had pale, egg-shaped faces and slender waists and big hips so that they looked like girls.

In a word, the ugly city of Eschropolis is full of girls who look like boys, and boys who look like girls. Androgynous interchangeability is what is *en vogue*, and Pilgrim John had enough sense to run far away.

At one level, this seems to be how Lewis intended much of what he wrote on the topic of maleness and femaleness to be read: as a roadmap to escape the ugly, androgynous city of Eschropolis. All around him, Lewis saw the budding cultural rejection of true masculinity and femininity, and he wanted to lead the counter-rebellion.

Following Lewis, careful readers are led to escape ugly Eschropolis by embracing the distinctive goods of masculinity, femininity, and marriage. Toward that end, readers must gain a vision for at least three themes in Lewis's writing: (1) A vision for God's created order, or what Lewis called the Tao; (2) A vision for a distinct masculinity and femininity; and (3) A vision for how the created order and our givenness as male and female should inform how we live together in community.

GOD'S CREATED ORDER

When it comes to morality, there are ready pitfalls one can fall into on either side of the road. The first is to equate "is-ness"

with "ought-ness" — that is, to sanction whatever *happens* to be as the way it always *should have been*, and *should be*. This is the error deterministic naturalists make, and the consequences of this view of the world are easy to spot. Thankfully, as Lewis points out in *Mere Christianity*, mankind has an in-born sense of rightness and wrongness that doesn't always square with the way the world is. This sense drives us to search for a moral system grounded outside of simply what we apprehend with the senses.

But the other error is equally dangerous, and that is to conclude from this premise that *nothing* is the way it should be, and that all perceived reality is teaching us the wrong way. If true, everything that *is* must be rejected for some other way that it *should be*. This error is often associated with Gnosticism, which seeks a platonic spiritualism that transcends the embodied, materialistic world.

Related to the question at hand, the Lord Jesus was presented with this is-ness versus ought-ness dilemma in a famous episode from the gospel of Matthew when the Pharisees tried to trap him with a question. In Matthew 19, his opponents ask Jesus, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" The dilemma that Jesus faced was whether he would contradict Moses and the Scriptures, or the religious leaders of the day, in either forbidding divorce altogether or endorsing the prevailing libertine attitude that permitted divorce for any reason.

The purpose of appealing to this passage here is not to weigh in on the question of divorce, but instead to learn from the reasoning in Jesus's response. Jesus says in Matthew 19:4-6:

Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female,⁵ and said, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"?⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.

Where does Jesus turn to ground his ethical approach to the question of marriage? In this passage, he quotes from Genesis 1 and 2 to cast a vision for what God intends. The Pharisees are right to recognize the distance between this vision and the way the world is — even in what was permitted under Moses's administration in the Scriptures when they ask him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" But Jesus is ready for the question when he replies, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so."

In Jesus's response is a whole world of ethical reasoning, reasoning Lewis himself understood and employed. Here it is in brief: We live in a post-Genesis 3 world, where sin has corrupted and marred and effaced — but not erased — God's design, including creating us male and female in his image. But, "from the beginning it was not so," which means we ought to appeal to the "beginning," to God's original creation, in order to ground "ought-ness" in the original "is-ness."

In a 1945 essay, "Membership," Lewis challenges both individualistic and collectivist approaches to society by going back to the beginning of creation: "I do not believe

God created an egalitarian world.” It could be argued that this sentence goes a long way toward summarizing Lewis’s position on a good many topics. Here we find two commitments. First is his deference to original design, to the way it should be according to God’s creation. And second is his understanding that built into creation is not egalitarianism, but differentiation. Here is the full quote:

I do not believe God created an egalitarian world. I believe the authority of parent over child, husband over wife, learned over simple, to have been as much a part of the original plan as the authority of man over beast. I believe that if we had not fallen, patriarchal monarchy would be the sole lawful form of government.³

That last sentence will make Americans

squirm and humor their British cousins, but there is surely something in this paragraph that makes everyone a little uncomfortable. Why? Because we live in an egalitarian age. We have been catechized from the moment of birth to spot inequalities and then immediately challenge them without first asking if they are natural or imposed, just or unjust. In the wake of such an impulse is the collapse of not just gender norms, but traditional society itself. This impulse to eradicate “inequality” underlies the erasure of male- and female-only spaces, the push to break the “glass ceiling” everywhere, and the problematization of any conventional hierarchy, whether in economics, politics, immigration, or business. This principle’s extreme application aims at eradicating every inequality, downplaying and erasing any difference at all — even to the point of absurdity, where relating to one’s own wife or children in a way that is distinct from the

way one relates to others is suspect at best, or downright evil at worst.

But isn’t the push to erase inequality, in some ways, at the root of the original rebellion recorded in Genesis 3? The temptation that came from the serpent was to treat all trees the same, equally, as trees that are permitted to eat from — no distinction. Why? So that they could be like God — no distinction. In many ways, Romans chapter 1 teaches us that the failure to maintain the Creator-creature distinction works its way out in the collapse of other distinctions built into creation as well.

First comes the collapse of the distinction between the animal world and the unique status of mankind created in God’s image: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.” And then comes the collapse in the distinction between male and female: “For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another.” Note carefully Paul’s use of the word “nature” here. It partakes in the same appeal Jesus makes in Matthew 19 when he said, “from the beginning it was not so.” And it is the same appeal Lewis makes when he citing what God created in the beginning as not “egalitarian.”

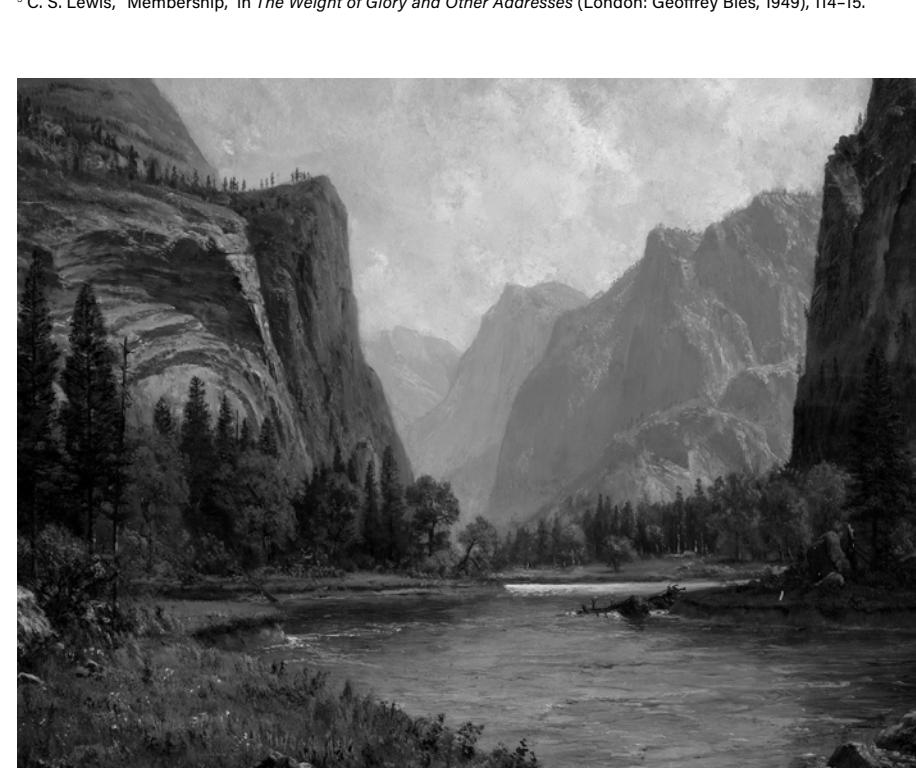
In other places, Lewis calls this reality, what we might call the substrate of creation designed by God which he called good, the Tao. For instance, Lewis described the Tao in the *Abolition of Man* this way:

The Tao, which others may call Natural Law or Traditional Morality or the First Principles of Practical Reason or the First Platitudes, is not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgments. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained. The effort to refute it and raise a new system of value in its place is self-contradictory. There has never been, and never will be, a radically new judgment of value in the history of the world. What purport to be new systems or... ideologies...all consist of fragments from the Tao itself, arbitrarily wrenched from their context in the whole and then swollen to madness in their isolation, yet still owing to the Tao and to it alone such validity as they possess.⁴

In other words, what do we set our moral compass by? What do we judge our ethical systems by, our morality? Christian theologians often speak of two books of God’s revelation: there is the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature. It is this latter “book,” the Tao, that the Book of Scripture infallibly interprets and never contradicts or effaces. And it is through a close reading of both that we can catch a vision for our second concern, masculinity and femininity.

THE MEANING OF MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY

Male-female differentiation is built into the created order. What is more, it is so deeply embedded in the world that it informs not just who we are and who we



³ C. S. Lewis, “Membership,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1949), 114–15.

Complementarity, and by extension sex, is not merely accidental, or even incidental in creation. It is hardwired into the world. The polarity is the point, and it is reflected in all of creation

should be as men and women, but how we ought to see the world. This is the argument Lewis makes in his science fiction trilogy in the middle of his second book, *Perelandra*. The protagonist Ransom sees two angelic beings named Malacandra and Perelandra, who rule Mars and Venus — masculinity and femininity — respectively. What strikes Ransom most about these two beings, though, is the evident difference — distinction — between them, even though they exhibit no obvious sex characteristics:

But whence came this curious difference between them? He found that he could point to no single feature wherein the difference resided, yet it was impossible to ignore. One could try — Ransom has tried a hundred times — to put it into words. He has said that Malacandra was like rhythm and Perelandra like melody. He has said that Malacandra affected him like a quantitative, Perelandra like an accentual, metre.

At this point, the reader realizes that

Lewis has set this scene to make a deeper, philosophical point about masculinity and femininity:

[W]hat Ransom saw at that moment was the real meaning of gender. Everyone must sometimes have wondered why in nearly all tongues certain inanimate objects are masculine and others feminine. What is masculine about a mountain or feminine about certain trees? Ransom has cured me of believing that this is a purely morphological phenomenon, depending on the form of the word. Still less is gender an imaginative extension of sex. Our ancestors did not make mountains masculine because they projected male characteristics into them. The real process is the reverse. Gender is a reality, and a more fundamental reality than sex.⁵

Here, in the middle of Lewis's Ransom trilogy, one discovers the true depths of his understanding of complementarity. Complementarity, and by extension sex, is

not merely accidental, or even incidental in creation. It is hardwired into the world. The polarity is the point, and it is reflected in all of creation: Mars and Venus, sun and moon, day and night, land and sea; “Male and female he created them.”

In this way, Lewis's concept of complementarity is related to his concept of the Tao. Our world is infused with objective meaning, including complementarity. And all of it demands a certain value response. Whether or not we act accordingly, there are ways of living and moving and having our being in the world that are fitting, and there are many ways that are not. When we downplay or ignore the Tao, or in this case the differences between male and female, we hinder ourselves and limit our true potential as created beings. Our differences aren't just roles, or masks that can be put on or put off. They are part and parcel with reality.

One of the besetting sins Lewis observed and frequently addressed in his writing was the slow yet steady push toward male-female interchangeability, a trend that has only accelerated since. I think Lewis intuitively understood that a society's failure to maintain and celebrate distinctions in the sexes paves the way for civilizational collapse.

A strange ideological bedfellow made this same point decades later. Feminist Camille Paglia's 1990 Yale dissertation-turned-book, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, examines historical movements toward androgyny.⁶ And at a Battle of Ideas forum, she gave a talk titled,

“Lesson from History: Transgender Mania is Sign of Cultural Collapse” in which she made this point: “The movement towards androgyny occurs in late phases of culture, as a civilization is starting to unravel. You can find it again and again and again through history.”

Lewis understood this intuitively, and he wielded his pen to try and turn back the unravelling. Will we listen? Perhaps we are convinced about the ought-ness that exists in God creating us male and female. Perhaps we are convinced of the problem confronting us in the push toward androgyny and male-female interchangeability. But what would it look like for men to lean into their masculinity, and women to lean into their femininity, and for there to be mutual appreciation of the differences, instead of either dismissive denigration (misogyny) or unnatural envy (feminism, transgenderism, homosexuality, etc.)?

In other words, what does a healthy masculinity and femininity look like? One can almost hear Lewis's struggle to concretely define masculinity and femininity in Ransom's words quoted above, where he assigns impressions to Malacandra and Perelandra: rhythm vs. melody, quantitative vs. accentual, etc. In fact, this may be one of the reasons Lewis chose the structure and setting of the Ransom trilogy, to “show” rather than “tell” via literary expression more masculine and feminine forms.

Masculinity and femininity are notoriously hard to define. They are easier to recognize than to prescribe, and they are often recognized in relief to each other — you could even say in complement to the other. But

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1943), 171–72.

⁶ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

just because they are hard to define doesn't mean they aren't important. G. K. Chesterton, for instance, insists that words that are hard to define are not necessarily vague or unimportant, but perhaps some of the most important words we use. As Chesterton argues in his biography of Charles Dickens,

Much of our modern difficulty, in religion and other things, arises merely from this: that we confuse the word "indefinable" with the word "vague." If someone speaks of a spiritual fact as "indefinable" we promptly picture something misty, a cloud with indeterminate edges. But this is an error even in commonplace logic. The thing that cannot be defined is the first thing; the primary fact. . . . The indefinable is the indisputable. . . . There are popular expressions which everyone uses and no one can explain; which the wise man will accept and reverence, as he reverence desire or darkness or any elemental thing. The prigs of the debating club will demand that he should define his terms. And, being a wise man, he will flatly refuse. This first inexplicable term is the most important term of all. The word that has no definition is the word that has no substitute. If a man falls back again and again on some such word as "vulgar" or "manly," do not suppose that the word means nothing because he cannot say what it means.⁷

Ransom himself experiences something similar when he attempts to describe his voyage to Venus, which Lewis describes as "rather too vague... to put into words." Ransom reflects, "On the contrary, it is

words that are vague. The reason why the thing can't be expressed is that it's too definite for language"

Perhaps this is God's design for masculinity and femininity, that they may only be truly appreciated alongside their complement. To fully know the meaning of masculine, one must have a concept of feminine. To know "hard," one must be able to comprehend "soft." After all, how can "day" be understood without "night"? "Land" without "sea"? It is no accident that we arrive back at the roots of the created order. "Male and female he created them," after the pattern of the rest of creation — heaven and earth, sun and moon, land and sea, masculine and feminine.

As I write about masculinity in *Life on the Silent Planet*, an edited volume of essays on Lewis's Ransom trilogy, I think its complement in femininity can be inferred:

An exact definition of masculinity is elusive for another reason: masculinity is not self-referential. It is outwardly directed. It must be productive, active, oriented to something other than itself for it to bear fruit and to experience meaningful consummation. In many ways the essence of traditional masculine vocation, leadership, is only meaningful in relation to those led, protection to those protected, provision in relation to those provided for.⁸

Lewis touches on this theme of outwardness in relation to masculinity in his book *Mere Christianity* when he discusses headship in marriage. Even back in the

1950s, when his radio broadcasts were organized for publication, Lewis acknowledged the unpopularity of the Christian teaching of male headship in marriage. This fact alone should cause us to consider his intentionality in including this unpopular teaching, nevertheless, in his account of a *mere Christianity*.

In defense of the historic Christian doctrine on marriage, Lewis anticipates two questions: Why does there need to be a "head" in marriage instead of pure equality? And why does it have to be the man?

Lewis's first answer gets to the nature of the one-flesh union and the necessity of husband and wife staying together — the necessity of permanence — even in the face of deep disagreement. If there are two heads in a marriage, and not one, inevitably there will arise two directions that tend to pull the marriage apart. But when he answers the second question as to why the man must be the head and not the woman, Lewis calls the arrangement "unnatural" when wives rule over their husbands. Why is it unnatural? Lewis writes,

The relations of the family to the outer world — what might be called its foreign policy — must depend, in the last resort, upon the man, because he always ought to be, and usually is, much more just to outsiders.⁹

In this, we see Lewis reflecting, probably both consciously and subconsciously, on the connection between masculinity, manhood, and outwardness, as compared to the inwardness of femininity. This dif-

ference is rooted in the very nature of the sexes, which can be observed both biologically and temperamentally, and how this difference is expressed linguistically.

Consider how our bodies are differently organized for sexual reproduction. Men reproduce externally, women internally. The Designer is not arbitrary. God creates the man from the ground to work and keep the ground; he builds the woman from the side of the man to help the man and to "house" future men and women. Externality and internality are not accidental to male and female. Form and function are mutually illuminating — even the sexless *oyarsa* that Ransom sees on Perelandra exhibit forms that hint at their differences. Malacandra wields a spear, and Perelandra has open palms. Prominence and receptivity, respectively.

We are not here attempting a definite definition of masculinity and femininity — just the opposite. Instead, with Lewis, we are merely commanding them as good, as recognizable, and as necessary to embrace as males and females created in God's image wanting to live in line with God's creation.

If we gain a vision for God's created order, and a vision for masculinity and femininity, we will be ready to live out this vision in community.

LIFE IN COMMUNITY

As Professor Michael Ward points out, the three books in Lewis's Ransom trilogy play out over a meta-structure of drama-

⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (London: Methuen, 1906), 1-2.

⁸ Colin J. Smothers, "Men Are From Mars: Masculinity in *Out of the Silent Planet*," in *Life on the Silent Planet: Essays on Christian Living from C.S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy*, ed. Rhys Laverty (Whitefish, MT: Davenant Press, 2024).

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), 63.

tized masculinity in book one, femininity in book two, and matrimony — not an exact synonym of marriage, but related — in book three.¹⁰ This structure is beautiful and fitting with God's design — our maleness and femaleness, after all, as Jesus teaches in Matthew 19, bear witness to God's institution of marriage. And ultimately marriage, according to the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 5, points in mystery to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and his love for the church.

Single or married, we are all called to esteem marriage for just this reason, as the author of the Book of Hebrews commands. But a closer look at the third book in the trilogy, *That Hideous Strength*, reveals complementary arcs in the marriage of the two main characters, Mark and Jane. As the book progresses, each bends away from stunted versions of masculinity and femininity toward a full embrace of complementarity. Mark, who is previously an unassertive workaholic, learns to shun passivity toward his wife and to live out self-sacrificial leadership. Jane, a feminist careerist, learns to joyfully submit to her husband and embrace her natural femininity. Along the way, Lewis makes sure the reader does not mistake him for promoting degenerate stereotypes, as hyper-masculinity and hyper-femininity are lampooned in the story's villains.

The turning point for Jane's character is especially instructive. It comes in a conversation with Ransom, who is now the Director at St. Anne's. Jane is speaking to Ransom about her own marriage to Mark.

"I thought love meant equality," she says to him, "and free companionship."

"Ah, equality!" replies the Director. "We must talk of that some other time. Yes, we must all be guarded by equal rights from one another's greed, because we are fallen. Just as we wear clothes for the same reason. But the naked body should be there underneath the clothes, ripening for the day when we shall need them no longer. Equality is not the deepest thing, you know."

What is deeper than equality? Lewis has already given us the answer in the trilogy's very structure: complementarity. In the same conversation, the Director gives Jane marital advice. She admits to him that she doesn't share his view of marriage. Ransom's response is striking: "[I]t is not a question of how you or I look on marriage but how my Masters look on it"¹¹

Even still, Jane is hampered by her feminism, fixated with tunnel vision on equality. This fixation makes the Director's advice to her all the more jarring. Obedience, he recommends to her. Obedience and humility.

At this point in the book, the reader can almost hear the last gasp of feminism leave Jane, while something deeper and primal begins to stir in her. Lewis, in his own creative way, has simply exegeted in narrative form the Bible's own teaching and rationale on marriage and complementarity, which itself is rooted in God's original design for male and female in Genesis 1 and 2. It is not a question of

how you or I look on it, but how the Master does. And the Master has told us in Scripture how he views the husband and wife in marriage. He is the one who made them male and female, after all.

FURTHER UP AND FURTHER IN

At heart, Lewis was a conservative and a traditionalist, an old soul and a "dinosaur," as he once referred to himself. But he wasn't a reactionary. He didn't define his position over against the "progress" of his day, although functionally that's where he often found himself. Instead, he saw himself as holding onto the good, true, and beautiful, because that is what God revealed.

To take a step away from what has been revealed by God in Scripture and nature has unintended consequences, especially when it comes to marriage and how we live as male and female. Lewis telegraphed where the sexual progressives of his day were headed in his essay "Priestesses in the Church," where he stridently opposed female ordination to the priesthood in his beloved Anglican church:

The innovators are really implying that sex is something superficial, irrelevant to the spiritual life. To say that men and women are equally eligible for a certain profession is to say that for the purpose of that profession their sex is irrelevant. We are, within that context, treating both as neuters.¹²

Neuters. Androgyny. Non-binary. This

is where Lewis knew we would land if we pursued the path of interchangeability. As we look around today, we can't help but admit he was right. But this doesn't mean we can't still return. We should heed Lewis's concluding words in this essay:

We cannot shuffle or tamper so much. With the Church, we are farther in: for there we are dealing with male and female not merely as facts of nature but as the live and awful shadows of realities utterly beyond our control and largely beyond our direct knowledge. Or rather, we are not dealing with them but (as we shall soon learn if we meddle) they are dealing with us.¹³

Further up and further in. This is how we escape Eschropolis on this our Silent Planet. As we press into God and his revelation, we find the meaning of masculinity and femininity, as well as the meaning of marriage.

Like Lewis, I don't believe God created an egalitarian world. But I do believe the world God created is good. And we would do well to receive and celebrate it as such, including the differences between men and women, and stop shuffling and tampering so much. ×

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¹⁰ Michael Ward, "Selling the Well and the Wood: *That Hideous Strength* and the Abolition of Matrimony" in *Life on the Silent Planet: Essays on Christian Living from C.S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy*, ed. Rhys Lavery (Whitefish, MT: Davenant Press, 2024).

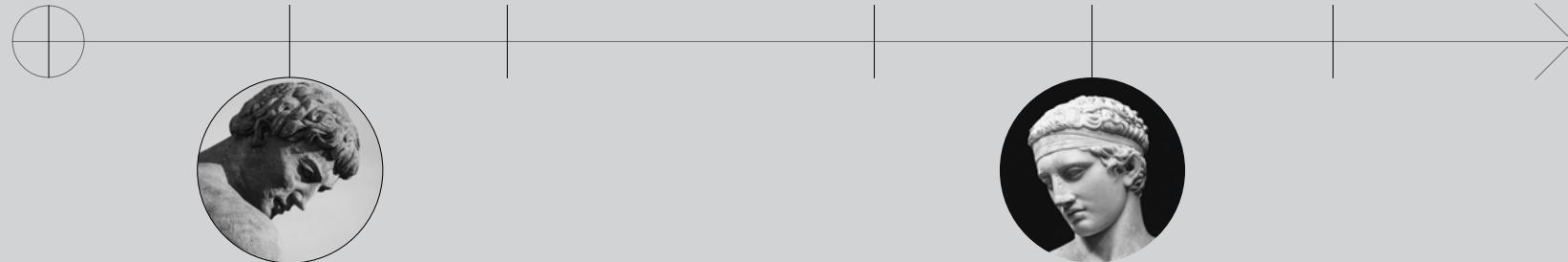
¹¹ C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1945), 148–49.

¹² C. S. Lewis, "Priestesses in the Church?," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 236.

¹³ Ibid.



A History of



Complementarianism

I. WHY "COMPLEMENTARIANISM" NEEDED A NAME¹

On a December morning in 1988 at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, held that year at Wheaton College, in Wheaton, Illinois, a group of men and women who had been meeting in secret and on an invitation-only basis for two years, went public. They announced the formation of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) to the conference, handed out brochures to attendees, and held a press conference, although, as it happened, *Christianity Today* was the only media

outlet that turned up.²

Wayne Grudem, one of the key members of the group, recalls that earlier that same day in 1988, at a breakfast meeting of the CBMW in the main dining room of the Hilton hotel,³ they coined the term 'complementarian' as a one-word representation of their viewpoint. Those at the breakfast included John Piper, Wayne Grudem, Bruce Waltke, Wayne House, and Kent Hughes.

The new term was shorthand for the biblical vision of the sexes that a wider group of men and women had been working to

articulate since 1986 (more on that year below). That vision had been finalized a year earlier in a meeting on December 2–3, 1987, at the Sheraton Hotel in the city of Danvers, Massachusetts, where the ETS conference was being held. They called this statement, "The Danvers Statement on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood" (after the city in which they were meeting).⁴

Almost forty years on, the Danvers Statement has stood the test of time as a summary of the complementarian position. It opens with ten points of *rationale*, lists five *purposes* it hopes will be pursued, and

ends with ten *affirmations* on the equality and distinctions of men and women before God.⁵

From its inception then, as Denny Burk, current President of CBMW, explains, "Complementarianism was not first and foremost a sociological descriptor or movement. Nor was it describing an ethos or a set of extra-biblical stereotypes. The term emerged as a shorthand to describe the theological vision of the Danvers Statement."⁶

"Complementarianism" was a name for the theological vision. But why was any of

¹ This essay was first delivered as a seminar for the Priscilla and Aquila Centre, Moore Theological College, Sydney, Australia, August 13, 2025 (<https://paa.moore.edu.au/>).

² Wayne Grudem, "Personal Reflections on the History of CBMW and the State of the Gender Debate," *Journal of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Spring 2009): 14.

³ Denny Burk, "Mere Complementarianism," *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 1.2 (Fall 2019): 31.

⁴ Grudem, "Personal Reflections," 14.

⁵ "Appendix 2: The Danvers Statement," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 469–471. This book is hereafter referred to in footnotes as *RBMW*. The Danvers Statement is available online at "The Danvers Statement," *CBMW.org*, <https://cbmw.org/about/the-danvers-statement/>.

⁶ Burk, "Mere Complementarianism," 30.

this necessary? And *what* did they hope to achieve?

The following history of complementarianism falls into two halves. In the first half is the *why* of “complementarianism”— why the term was needed. This section goes at lightning speed from the Enlightenment to second wave feminism and into the 1970s and 80s, when the opposing visions of complementarianism and egalitarianism took shape. The second half treats “Lived Complementarianism,” with some of the developments and debates that have marked the history since then.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Second Wave Feminism and Social change

The vision of complementarianism needed a summary statement because of what was happening in the wider society. In fact, both sides of the complementarian/egalitarian debate in the church point to secular feminism and the huge social changes it brought as the backdrop to the contemporary gender debate in the church.

Second-wave feminism began in the 1960s and continued through to the 1990s. The foundations of the modern feminist movement, however, can be traced (at least) back to the Enlightenment: the late-seventeenth and eighteenth century intellectual movement marked by a rejection of authority; a belief in human progress; the elevation of human reason over faith or tradition; and a vision of humanity as autonomous beings, free to choose to be and do as we want (unencumbered by God, church, or state). We

might sum this up as skepticism, individualism, and reason.

All modern forms of feminism (notwithstanding their significant differences) have their foundations in the Enlightenment. Another related root is the belief that if there are no divinely ordained or revealed differences between the sexes, and if God is not the creator, ruler, and judge of all, then why should one sex be denied the self-appointed “freedoms” and “rights” of the other?

Space does not permit us to look at how this played out for good or for ill in the intervening centuries — instead we will fast-forward to the mid-twentieth century and second wave feminism.

Second-wave feminism grew out of the post-WWII period, which saw men returning from the war and needing jobs. This return pushed women out of the full-time workforce. The post-war period was also a time of prosperity, a rising middle class, consumerism, higher rates of marriage, the invention and widespread use of time-saving household appliances, and a rejection of communism, and all communism meant for the family.

In the U.S. in particular, this social change led to a culture of domesticity, with women marrying younger and having more children than they had even in the 1920s before the Depression, hence the term “Baby Boomers.” This era was typified in shows like *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver*.⁷ Here is the picture of that moment in time: white

picket fences, apron-clad mom baking apple pie, dad walking in from work to a cooked dinner, with the kitchen being the centre of the home! It was a sex-segregated vision, of men going off to work in the real world and women staying home with the children.

Against this backdrop in 1963, Betty Friedan’s book, *The Feminine Mystique*, landed in bookstores, claiming that each “suburban wife” struggled alone with a strange stirring and dissatisfaction. And that

as she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question: “Is this all?”⁸

In Friedan’s words, it was “the problem that has no name”, and her solution to this “problem with no name” was for women to join the paid workforce in jobs where they would find meaning and satisfaction.

At the same time in the 1960s, women’s rights were being addressed at the political level. In the U.S., President Kennedy appointed a Commission on the Status of Women, which in 1963 led to a Presidential order for the civil service to employ people based only on their ability, and not their sex.⁹ This was joined by the Equal Pay Act (1963) and Civil Rights Act (1964), which addressed discrimination on the basis of sex.

By the 1970s, the liberal feminism of Friedan and others, which advocated for social, legal, and political equality for the sexes, had given way to radical feminism, and the problem now had a name. It was *patriarchy*.

Women, it was claimed, were an oppressed class within society, a “sex class.” All women were oppressed, and all men were (potentially) their oppressors or exploiters. Moreover, all men *individually* benefitted from the patriarchal/anti-women/ misogynistic nature of society, which itself was irredeemably patriarchal and male-dominated. Even the language systems reflected this patriarchy: e.g., the generic use of the word “man”; women’s personal titles being based on their marital status (Mrs v. Ms); wives taking their husband’s last name; and even English words like *chairman*, *history*, *human*, and *woman*.

Patriarchy was everywhere and unavoidable, and it operated at a societal/structural level and *individual* level.

Women’s welfare could only be achieved, it was argued, by recognising the *essential differences* between women and men, through woman-centred studies and perspectives, and the creation of a women’s culture based on women’s bodies and life experiences.¹⁰

These differences were a source of pride and confidence, not something to be ashamed of or obliterated or suppressed. Think Helen Reddy’s chart-topping 1972 anthem, “I am woman, hear me roar, I am

⁷ Elinor Burkett and Laura Brunell, “Feminism,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed August 7, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism>.

⁸ Betty Friedan, *The Feminist Mystique* (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 13.

⁹ Kirsten Birkett, *The Essence of Feminism* (Kingsford: Matthias Media, 2000), 46.

¹⁰ Judith Lorber, *The Variety of Feminisms and their Contributions to Gender Equality* (Bibliotheks-und Informationssystem der Universität Oldenburg, 1997), 24.

strong, I am invincible, I am woman.”¹¹

Whereas first wave feminism in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century had advocated for equality between the sexes where the goals were absolute (you can either vote or own property or attend university or not), radical feminism sought a thorough rebuilding of culture, with a new feminised value system based on women’s characteristics.¹²

Here’s how leading, second-wave feminist Kate Millett described the power, problem, and pervasiveness of *patriarchy* and its relation to the family and the state in her 1970 book, *Sexual Politics*:

Patriarchy’s chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a *patriarchal* unit within a patriarchal whole. . . . As the fundamental instrument and the foundation unit of *patriarchal* society the family and its roles are prototypical. Serving as an agent of the larger society, the family . . . acts as a unit in the government of the *patriarchal* state which rules its citizens through its family heads.¹³

On religion and patriarchy, Millett wrote:

Patriarchal religion could consolidate this position [i.e., of downgrading the role of women in procreation and ascribing all the power of life to men] by the creation of a male God

or gods, demoting, discrediting, or eliminating goddesses and constructing a theology whose basic postulates are male supremacist, and one of whose central functions is to uphold and validate the patriarchal structure.¹⁴

Or more succinctly: “Patriarchy has God on its side.”¹⁵

FEMINISM IN THE CHURCH

These debates, their effects, and these cultural changes were not confined to the world outside the church. Things were happening there, too.

Women’s Ordination

The most visible of these debates was *women’s ordination*. Between the two World Wars, a handful of churches had moved to ordain women to identical ministries as men. But after the second World War, with the factors above affecting Western societies, women were admitted to full, ordained ministry in the Lutheran Church in Denmark in 1948, Sweden in 1960, Norway in 1961, and the Church of Scotland in 1969.

By the end of the 1960s, most mainstream denominations in the U.S. had begun ordaining women to full clerical positions, with the exceptions of the Episcopal (Anglican) and Roman Catholic churches. The Anglican Church of Canada ordained women to the priest-

hood in 1977, and the Episcopal Church followed a year later.¹⁶

That same year, in 1978, at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) — the conference mentioned above — there was a major debate on the topic of women’s ordination. The debate involved a woman, Margaret Howe, who published a book on the matter in 1982, speaking in favour; and a man, Robert Saucy, speaking against.¹⁷

Formation of Egalitarian Organisations and Publications

In the 70s, there was the *formation of organisations and publications* set up to challenge the historic understanding of the Scriptures about men and women and to change church practice. In the U.S. in 1974, a newly formed organization called Evangelicals for Social Action set up a working group that became the Evangelical Women’s Caucus (EWC). The Evangelical Women’s Caucus campaigned for women’s ordination, inclusive language in Bible translations and Christian publishing, and opposed what they saw as discriminatory hiring policies in Christian organisations.¹⁸

EWC’s first conference was in 1975 entitled, “Women in Transition: A Biblical Approach to Feminism.” Over the next decade, they spread their message and influence through annual conferences and through chapters scattered across the U.S. They also published a journal called

Daughters of Sarah, which was dedicated to “biblical feminism.” The EWC explained their mission this way:

We are Christians; we are also feminists. Some say we cannot be both, but Christianity and feminism for us are inseparable.¹⁹

But just over a decade later, in 1986, the EWC split over the issue of lesbianism and homosexual rights. The majority claimed homosexuality was compatible with biblical Christianity and remained in the Evangelical Women’s Caucus. But those who claimed it was not compatible, who formed a large minority, resigned and set up a new group called Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE), which we will come to shortly. The split over lesbianism and homosexual rights was such big news that it was reported in the *Los Angeles Times*.²⁰

By 1990, the EWC had changed its name to become the *Evangelical and Ecumenical* Women’s Caucus (EEWC), which gives some sense of its theological drift. It is now openly committed to inclusive, liberal feminist theology.

The question at the heart of these developments was the authority and place of the Bible in feminist theological thought and life. Below is a snapshot of how radical feminists were answering these questions in this period.

One of the leading figures was Mary Daly,

¹¹ Mary Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1992), 66–67.

¹² Judith Lorber, *The Variety of Feminisms and their Contributions to Gender Equality*, (Bibliotheks-und Informationssystem der Universität Oldenburg, 1997), 17.

¹³ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Urbano and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1969, 1970, 1990, 2000), 33 (italics added).

¹⁴ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 28.

¹⁵ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 51.

¹⁶ Harold W. Hoehner, “Can a Woman be a Pastor-Teacher?” *JETS* 50.4 (December 2007): 762; Pamela D. H. Cochran, *Evangelical Feminism: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 23.

¹⁷ Ronald W. Pierce, “Contemporary Evangelicals for Gender Equality,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, 2nd rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 60.

¹⁸ “About the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women’s Caucus,” *Christian Feminism Today*, <https://eewc.com/about/>.

¹⁹ *Daughters of Sarah* 1, No. 1 (1974): 1, cited in Cochran, *Evangelical Feminism*, 33.

²⁰ John Dart, “Evangelical Women’s Caucus Backs Gay Rights,” *Los Angeles Times* (July 19, 1986), <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-07-19-me-26359-story.html>.

whose many books tracked her journey away from the Catholic faith of her childhood. They include *The Church and the Second Sex: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* in 1968, and *Beyond God the Father* in 1973.

In a 1971 article entitled, "After the Death of God the Father," she wrote:

The Judaic-Christian tradition has served to legitimate sexually imbalanced patriarchal society. Thus, for example, the image of the Father God, spawned in the human imagination and sustained as plausible by patriarchy, has in turn rendered service to this type of society by making its mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and fitting. If God in "his" heaven is a father ruling "his" people, then it is in the "nature" of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated.²¹

She joked that if the Bible was de-patriarchalized, "perhaps there would be enough salvageable material to comprise an interesting pamphlet."²²

The quote below is one for which Daly is perhaps most famous:

If God is male, then male is God. The divine patriarch castrates women as

long as he is allowed to live on in the human imagination.²³

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, a similarly influential feminist, wrote:

The Christian marginality of women has its roots in the patriarchal beginnings of the church and in the androcentrism of Christian revelation.²⁴

Virginia Mollencott, who a decade earlier had been a consultant for the New International Version Bible translation committee, wrote the following:

I am beginning to wonder whether indeed Christianity is patriarchal to its very core. If so, count me out. Some of us may be forced to leave Christianity in order to participate in Jesus' discipleship of equals.²⁵

And Rosemary Radford Ruether addressed the future of feminist theology in 1985:

The patriarchal distortion of all tradition, *including Scripture*, throws feminist theology back upon the primary intuitions of religious experience itself.²⁶

As you can see, this is a movement away from Scripture as the authoritative infallible word of God to a focus on women's experience, driven by the belief that the Bible and its historic translations were

written by *men for men*, and therefore that Christianity and the church are bad for women and responsible for great injustices against them and other minorities.

All these developments in the sixties, seventies, and early eighties help form the backdrop for the events I began with in the formation in 1988 of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, the Danvers Statement, and the coining of the term "Complementarianism." None of which happened in a vacuum. They were responses to challenges and changes in society and in the life of the church.

Three developments leading to "Complementarianism"

Before we look at those events more closely, we need to zoom in a little and look at what was happening in the eighties immediately before the Danvers Statement was written and the word "complementarian" was coined. Three developments are worth noting.

The first was in the *publishing of books* from both sides of the debate. There are too many to mention, but on the egalitarian side, leading figures Paul Jewett and Patricia Gundry both published influential books in 1980: Jewett on women's ordination and Gundry on egalitarian marriage. On the complementarian side that same year, Susan Foh responded to the rising threat of what was then called "biblical feminism" with her book, *Women and the Word of God* and Stephen Clark published *Man and Woman in Christ*. A year later (1981), James Hurley published *Man and*

Woman in Biblical Perspective.

The second development was an *evangelical colloquium on Women and the Bible* held over three days in October 1984 in Oak Brook, Illinois. Twenty-six evangelical leaders attended the invitation-only event, convened by Catherine Clark Kroeger, David Scholer, and Stanley Gundry (all egalitarians). The papers presented at the colloquium were published in 1986 in the book, *Women, Authority and the Bible*. As far as I can tell, almost all of those present were "biblical feminists" — as they were called then.

One of the few who upheld creational distinctions between women and men, J. I. Packer, drew attention in his paper to a feature of the debate, particularly in those days, which was that the debate about women's ministry had two battle fronts, as it were. One front concerned the exegetical arguments, while the other focused on the *pain* women felt from having their ministry restricted and their mistreatment at the hands of men and church leadership.²⁷

The third development was the *ETS annual meeting* in 1986, which that year met in Atlanta, Georgia. The entire conference was on the theme "Male and Female in Biblical and Theological Perspective." It drew a record number of approximately 350 members.

At the 1986 ETS annual meeting there were six plenary presentations: five by biblical feminists Catherine Kroeger, Gilbert Bilizekian, Walter Liefeld, David Scholer, and Aída Spencer, and one by a "complementarian" (to use the later

²¹ Mary Daly, "After the Death of God the Father: from the March 12, 1971 issue," *Commonweal*, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/after-death-god-father>.

²² Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1973), cited by Judith Plaskow, "Movement and Emerging Scholarship: Feminist Biblical Scholarship in the 1970s in the United States," in *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2014), 29.

²³ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1973, 1985), 19.

²⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983, 1994), 49.

²⁵ Virginia Mollencott, letter to *Christian Century* (March 7, 1984, p. 252) cited by Clark Pinnock in *Women, Authority and the Bible*, ed. Alvera Michelsen (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 51.

²⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Future of Feminist Theology in the Academy," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53 (1985): 710 (italics added).

²⁷ J. I. Packer, "Understanding the Differences," in *Women, Authority and the Bible*, ed. Alvera Michelsen, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 298.

term), Wayne Grudem.²⁸ In his words, he was “the token complementarian.”²⁹

The titles of the presentations were: “The Classical Concept of ‘Head’ and ‘Source’”; “The Nature of Christian Ministry and the Ministry of Women”; “Feminist Hermeneutics and Evangelical Biblical Interpretation”; “Women in Authoritative Positions”; and Grudem’s paper, “Paul’s Consistent Advocacy of Women’s Participation without Governing Authority,” which you’ll note both affirms the ministry of women and recognises biblical limits of that ministry.³⁰

Even so, the five-to-one imbalance on the platform did not reflect the majority view held by the membership of ETS. Troubled by this, Grudem and others “met secretly one evening” during the conference and decided to do something, because they feared that biblical feminists were “taking over the ETS in a way that was contrary to the convictions of the vast majority” of its members.³¹

FORMATION OF THE COUNCIL ON BIBLICAL MANHOOD AND WOMANHOOD (CBMW)

To that end, Grudem made a public announcement at the end of that 1986 ETS meeting that a new organisation was going to be set up dedicated to upholding both the equality and differences between men and women in marriage and the church, and if people were interested to get in touch with him or Wayne House.³²

So it was, in 1987, after having met during the year in Dallas to work out a statement of belief, and being “encouraged that God was guiding their work,” that a group of men and women met secretly ahead of the ETS meeting in Danvers and accepted what became known as the Danvers Statement, voting to incorporate as the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. Then a year later in 1988, the final form of the Danvers Statement was first published in November, and in December at the ETS meeting in Wheaton, CBMW went public, together with the newly minted term “complementarian.”³³

A double-page ad in *Christianity Today*, January 1989, announced the formation of CBMW to the wider evangelical community. It listed thirty council members (four of whom were women), a board of reference, and the Danvers Statement. The Q&A about the Council included the following questions:

Why did you form such a council? Because there is much confusion about male and female roles in the Christian world today. We wanted to do something to help clear it up.

What do you stand for? We hold that God made men and women to be equal in personhood and in value, but different in roles.

What do you mean by “different in roles”? We are convinced that Scripture affirms male leadership in the home, and that

in the church certain governing and teaching roles are restricted to men. On the other hand, Scripture strongly encourages women’s full participation in a vast array of needed ministries, and supports active, informed participation by women in decision-making in the family and the church.

But don’t all Christians agree with these views? Not at all: The idea of God-given distinctions between men’s and women’s roles in marriage and the church is under strong attack today in many books, articles, and speeches by people prominent in the evangelical world. And on the other side of this question, many families and churches have wrongly stifled women’s ministries and have wrongly neglected informed participation by women in the decision-making processes of the home and the church.

They also indicated their intention to “pray that the Lord would bring evangelicals to consensus on these issues rather than allowing controversies and divisions.”

In 1991 Crossway published *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (RBMW), the “big blue book” edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem, containing twenty-six essays by men and women. And in 1992, readers of *Christianity Today* voted it the “Book of the Year.”

²⁸ Simon Kistemaker, “Thirty-Eighth Annual Meeting,” *JETS* 30.1 (March 1987): 121.

²⁹ Grudem, “Personal Reflections,” 13.

³⁰ Kistemaker, “Thirty-Eighth Annual Meeting,” 121.

³¹ Grudem, “Personal Reflections,” 13.

³² Grudem, “Personal Reflections,” 13–14.

³³ Grudem, “Personal Reflections,” 14.

FORMATION OF CHRISTIANS FOR BIBLICAL EQUALITY (CBE)

Concurrent to these developments with CBMW, those arguing for the removal of distinctions between the sexes were also galvanising and setting up structures to advance their view. They also mark the 1986 ETS meeting in Atlanta as a milestone in their movement, seeing it as a significant win that the society would allow open debate on the topic,³⁴ and, do not forget, the plenary speakers were stacked 5-1 against the complementarian view!

The next year in 1987, a group of egalitarians started a new journal called *Priscilla Papers*, and then on January 2, 1988, Christians for Biblical Equality was formally established. Its founders were three women, Catherine Kroeger, Gretchen Hull and Alvera Mickselsen.³⁵ Their first president was Catherine Kroeger, who had left the Evangelical Women’s Caucus in 1986 when the split occurred over the acceptance of lesbianism and advocacy of homosexual rights.³⁶

In 1989, CBE produced their statement of belief (their equivalent of Danvers) called “*Men, Women, and Biblical Equality*,” and that same year in July they held their first international conference in Saint Paul, Minnesota. And in 2004/2005 the first two editions of *Discovering Biblical Equality* (DBE), the “orange book,” were published, also coming in at over 500 pages with twenty-nine essays.³⁷

³⁴ Pierce, “Contemporary Evangelicals for Gender Equality,” 64.

³⁵ Mimi Haddad, “CBE International and Gilbert Bilizekian,” *CBE International*, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/cbe-international-and-gilbert-bilizekian/>.

³⁶ “1986 EWC Conference: Free Indeed ... Empowered for Action,” *Christian Feminism Today*, <https://eewc.com/1986-conference/>.

³⁷ The second edition removed an essay by Judy Brown, who in 2004 was convicted of the attempted murder of the husband of her lesbian lover. I am grateful to Denny Burk for bringing this to my attention. See Gene Edward Veith, “Murder, She Wrote: The Strange and Sad Case of Felon/Theologian Judy Brown,” *World* (April 30, 2005), <https://wng.org/articles/murder-she-wrote-1617620056>.

COMMON GROUND BETWEEN COMPLEMENTARIANS AND EVANGELICAL EGALITARIANS

Space does not permit us to work through the two statements, *Danvers* and *Men, Women, and Biblical Equality* — or the big blue and orange books — to compare and contrast them. But a few things are worth noting:

First, both statements and both sides of the debate are expressly committed to and concerned for the welfare of women and children and oppose all forms of domestic abuse.³⁸

In fact, the 1988 Danvers Statement lists “the upsurge [in] physical and emotional abuse in the family” as the sixth of its ten points of rationale, and in 1994, at CBE’s request, three members of the CBMW council (Wayne Grudem, Mary Kassian, and Ray Ortland) met with three members of CBE to see if they could find points of agreement, and in the end they found the *one* issue they were united over was that “abuse within marriage is wrong.” Afterwards, Mary Kassian drafted a statement with feedback from the three CBE members so they could make a joint announcement. But, when the statement came before the CBE board, they rejected it because they thought a joint statement would confuse their constituency. Consequently, CBMW ended up publishing the statement on their own.³⁹

Secondly, both statements, as well as each

organization’s respective books, agree that the church hasn’t always treated women and the ministry of women as it should have done and agree that that needs to change.⁴⁰

Third, importantly, in the 1991 edition of RBMW, Piper and Grudem pointed out that while the debate was not a minor, in-house squabble, but has important implications for all of life and mission, they still “sense a kinship far closer with the founders of CBE than with those who seem to put their feminist commitments above Scripture.”⁴¹

That is an important reminder. But we should also note that sometimes it is difficult to see the differences between the two sides because we use the *same* language to say *different* things. Allow an example. All editions of the orange book make the following statement in the Introduction:

Egalitarianism recognizes patterns of authority in the family, church, and society—it is not anarchistic.... women and men are made equally in God’s image and likeness (Gen 1:27), are equally fallen (Rom 3:23), equally redeemable through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection (Jn 3:16), equally participants in the new-covenant community (Gal 3:28), equally heirs of God in Christ (1 Pet 3:7), and equally able to be filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit for life and ministry (Acts 2:17).⁴²

One could substitute “complementarianism” for “egalitarianism” and it would still be true. There is nothing especially egalitarian about it. But I left out parts of two sentences in the original statement. Now see the difference with the missing words filled in:

Egalitarianism recognizes patterns of authority in the family, church, and society—it is not anarchistic—but rejects the notion that any office, ministry, or opportunity should be denied anyone on the grounds of being male or female. This is because women and men are made equally in God’s image and likeness (Gen 1:27), are equally fallen (Rom 3:23), equally redeemable through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection (Jn 3:16), equally participants in the new-covenant community (Gal 3:28), equally heirs of God in Christ (1 Pet 3:7), and equally able to be filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit for life and ministry (Acts 2:17).

The above quotes highlight two things: 1) How much genuine shared Christian belief there is between evangelical egalitarians and complementarians on matters of salvation; we are brothers and sisters in Christ; but also, 2) If egalitarians think this statement defines what they believe and what complementarians *don’t* believe, then, it seems to me, we are understanding the word “equally” in very different ways. Otherwise, the causal clause, “For this reason,” just does not follow.

For egalitarians, the *equality* of women and men in creation and redemption means that any differences in role are re-

moved; equality means *sameness* or *interchangeability*. Whereas for complementarians, to use the words of Danvers:

1. Both Adam and Eve were created in God’s image, *equal* before God as persons and *distinct* in their manhood and womanhood

2. Distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order.⁴³

Or as the Preface of the big blue book puts it, complementarianism teaches “equality with beneficial differences.”⁴⁴

II: LIVED COMPLEMENTARIANISM

The label “complementarian”

As I indicated above, it took a while for both sides of this debate to find the best term for their position. Egalitarians were originally biblical or Christian or evangelical feminists. And those who recognise the biblical distinctives between men and women eventually landed on the label, “complementarian.”

Piper and Grudem explain why they landed on this term in the blue book, saying their preferred term is “complementarian,” because “it suggests both equality and beneficial differences between men and women.” They don’t like “traditionalist” because they want to allow Scripture to challenge traditional patterns of behaviour, which have often been marred by “selfishness, irresponsibility, passivity and abuse,” and they strongly reject

³⁸ “The Danvers Statement,” Rationale 6; Affirmation 4, 6; “Men, Women, and Biblical Equality,” Application: Family, 3.
³⁹ Grudem, “Personal Reflections,” 15.

⁴⁰ “The Danvers Statement,” Purpose 5; Affirmation 4; “Men, Women, and Biblical Equality,” Application: Community, 1.

⁴¹ John Piper and Wayne Grudem, “Charity, Clarity, and Hope,” RBMW, 404.

⁴² Rebecca Merrill Groothius and Ronald W. Pierce, “Introduction,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity with Hierarchy*, 13; with slight differences, Ronald W. Pierce, Cynthia Long Westfall, and Christa McKirland, “Introduction,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Cynthia Long

Westfall, and Christa McKirland, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2021), 2.

⁴³ Affirmation 1 and 2.

⁴⁴ John Piper and Wayne Grudem, RBMW, xv.

“hierarchicalist” because it puts all the emphasis on structured authority and expresses none of the equality and beauty of mutual interdependence that’s depicted in Scripture.⁴⁵

Back in 1984, J. I. Packer had expressed similar misgivings about the terms “hierarchy and patriarchy.”⁴⁶

Since the adoption of “complementarian” in 1988, debate about the best term for the theological vision it represents has continued on and off. In 2003, Old Testament scholar, Daniel Block suggested the term “patricentrism,” and in 2005 Russell Moore suggested “biblical patriarchy,”⁴⁷ which is gaining traction in some circles today (e.g., Doug Wilson).⁴⁸

But as we have seen, the term “patriarchy” in our current social context carries very negative connotations — whether it’s the old diffuse systemic “patriarchy” of second-wave feminism or the new notion of “*the* patriarchy” as a monolithic stand-alone entity that can be “smashed”⁴⁹ — “patriarchy” connotes a system created by men for men that harms women. And it only speaks to one half of the man-woman relationship and does that solely from the perspective of top-down authority. It’s about structure (or

in popular discourse, *domination*) and not equality, mutuality, and difference.

As Denny Burk explains, those who chose the word “complementarian” back in 1988,

... settled on this word because there simply wasn’t another one that adequately described their view. The term has a profound exegetical and linguistic root in the Hebrew of Genesis 2:18 (*kenegdo*), which the lexicons define as “corresponding to.”⁵⁰

Some detractors have pointed to the neologism — the new word, “complementarian” — and claimed that the concept itself is a novel idea and a man-made doctrine,⁵¹ to which Burk has responded:

... the claim that complementarianism is a man-made doctrinal innovation is a myth. The word “complementarianism” is indeed a relatively new term. But it is a new term coined to refer to an ancient teaching that is rooted in the text of Scripture. On the contrary, egalitarianism is the doctrinal innovation, not the biblical idea that men and women are created equally in God’s image with distinct and complementary differences. Indeed, some version of

⁴⁵ Piper and Grudem, Preface, *RBMW*, xiii–xiv.

⁴⁶ Packer, “Understanding the Differences,” 298.

⁴⁷ Burk, “Mere Complementarianism,” 32.

⁴⁸ E.g., Doug Wilson, “FAQs on Men, Women, and Sexuality,” *Blog and Mablog* (April 4, 2024), <https://dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/faqs-on-men-women-and-sexuality.html>; Dan Hult, “Biblical Patriarchy: Dispelling the Myths and Embracing God’s Design,” *Staff and Hammer Blog* (February 23, 2025), <https://danhult.com/2025/02/23/biblical-patriarchy-dispelling-the-myths-and-embracing-gods-design/>. See also Doug Ponder, “After Complementarianism What? Why Egalitarians are still winning the evangelical gender debate,” *Christ Over All* (June 30, 2025), <https://christoverall.com/article/longform/after-complementarianism-what-why-egalitarians-are-still-winning-the-evangelical-gender-debate/>; Kevin DeYoung, “Death of the Patriarchy? Complementarity and the Scandal of ‘Father Rule,’” *Desiring God* (July 19, 2022) <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/death-to-the-patriarchy>; Michael Carlin, “Male Headship or Servant Leadership? Yes!”, *Eikon* 5.2 (Fall 2023): 34–44; Denny Burk, “Why I Do Not Favor the Moniker ‘Biblical Patriarchy,” *Denny Burk* (August 14, 2025), <https://www.dennyburk.com/why-i-do-not-favor-the-moniker-biblical-patriarchy/>.

⁴⁹ Rosemary Lucy Hill and Kim Allen, “‘Smash the patriarchy’: the changing meanings and work of ‘patriarchy’ online,”

Feminist Theory 22.2 (2021): 10.

⁵⁰ Burk, “Mere Complementarianism,” 31.

⁵¹ E.g., Beth Moore cited by Yonat Shimron and Bob Smietana, “Beth Moore Apologizes for Her Role in Elevating ‘Complementarian’ Theology that Limits Women Leaders,” *Religion News Service* (April 7, 2021), <https://religionnews.com/2021/04/07/beth-moore-apologizes-for-complementarian-theology-women-leaders/>; Aaron Renn, “Why Complementarian Gender Theology is New,” *Aaron Renn* (July 23 2025), https://www.aaronrenn.com/p/complementarianism-is-new?utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web.

what we now call “complementarianism” is what the church has assumed for its entire 2,000-year history. Recent attempts to flip this script amount to unserious historical revisionism.⁵²

EQUAL BUT DIFFERENT

To this point, we have been focusing on the U.S., but of course things were also happening here in Australia. The debate in the church was focused on the issue of women’s ordination and identical ministries for women as men. Denominations and churches were divided over the issue.

At the forefront of this push in the church and secular media was the Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW), which was formed in Sydney in 1983.⁵³ The organization took its name and mission from a U.K. group by the same name that had started in 1979. MOW set up branches in major cities around Australia.⁵⁴ Its founding president was Dr. Patricia Brennan.

It was in this context that the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia voted to accept women to the diaconate in 1985, with the first women ordained as deacon in Sydney in March 1989.⁵⁵

But the push for women to have identical ministries with men continued. Matters came to a head in 1992 when the Gener-

al Synod, which met in Sydney in July and November, voted to ordain women priests. This occurred only after two bishops had tried to take matters into their own hands, generating publicity and creating division.⁵⁶

In the midst of these events and prior to the November General Synod later that year, a group of Sydney women led by Patricia Judge formed the group Equal but Different (EBD), which still exists today. Along with Patricia, its founding members were Marion Gabbott, Lesley Hicks, Helen Jensen, Pru Selden, Di Selden (later, Warren) and Christine Jensen.⁵⁷

At the time, MOW was very active in the media and effective at claiming they spoke for the silent majority of Anglicans and at characterising opposition to women’s ordination as misogynistic and a power play by men. It was a case easily made when the only voices in the media opposing women’s ordination were *male clergy*!

The rationale for EBD was that women’s voices were needed to defend the biblical vision of male leadership in the church and present a positive model of biblical women’s ministry and oppose women’s ordination. They also organised petitions signed by women for General Synod and Sydney Synod, which showed women’s opposition to women’s ordina-

⁵² Denny Burk, “Is Complementarianism a Man-Made Doctrine?”, *The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (August 6, 2021), <https://cbmw.org/2021/06/08/is-complementarianism-a-man-made-doctrine-2/>.

⁵³ Janet West, *Daughters of Freedom: A History of Women in the Australian Church* (Sutherland, NSW: Albatross Books, 1997), 409.

⁵⁴ “A Brief Outline History of MOW and the Struggle for Women’s Ordination in Australia,” *MOW Sydney*, <http://www.mow.faithweb.com/history.html>.

⁵⁵ West, *Daughters of Freedom*, 411.

⁵⁶ As happened in other Anglican jurisdictions, the matter advanced with “irregular” ordinations, which were then followed by the necessary legislation. The bishop of Canberra-Goulburn, Owen Dowling, announced he was going to ordain eleven women in February (against General Synod’s advice), only to be stopped by a court injunction that was later set aside. Then Archbishop of Perth, Peter Carnley took matters into his own hands and ordained 10 women as priests on March 7.

⁵⁷ Avril Lonsdale, “Discuss the factors which led to the formation of *Equal But Different* and assess its contribution to the 1992 debates surrounding the ordination of women to the priesthood,” unpublished paper (2020).

tion. The petition to General Synod in 1992 had over 1,800 signatories from twenty-two of the twenty-three Australian dioceses.

We should also mention, of course, the Priscilla and Aquila Centre, which was established by Moore College in 2011, under the direction of Jane Tooher.⁵⁸ The centre was set up to encourage the ministries of women in partnership with men.⁵⁹

GENDER-INCLUSIVE BIBLE TRANSLATION

The critique of language is an essential part of the feminist agenda. As mentioned above, gender-inclusive language in Bible translation and Christian literature was one of the first commitments of the Women's Caucus. Today, some radical feminists reject even the word "God" as irretrievably

patriarchal. Instead, they prefer "G*d" or "God/dess" or Sophia or use both male and female names, pronouns, and images for God, or gender-neutral terms like Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer (instead of Father, Son, and Spirit).

The debate about gender-neutral or gender-inclusive Bible translation in the evangelical world erupted in March 1997 with an article by Susan Olasky in *World*, a U.S. conservative weekly news magazine. The front cover had a picture of an NIV Bible — with a red female symbol on the spine — and the Bible morphing into a stealth bomber. The headline read: "The Stealth Bible: The Popular *New International Version* Bible is Quietly Going 'Gender-Neutral.'" Olasky's article was titled, "The Feminist Seduction of the Evangelical Church: Femme Fatale."⁶⁰

Two weeks later, the magazine published

two further articles, one that reported that Zondervan, the U.S. publisher of the NIV, had issued a statement saying they did not intend "to advance a particular social agenda or stray from the original biblical texts," rejecting the descriptors "inclusive" and "unisex," saying the new version would be "gender-accurate."

The second article was written by Wayne Grudem, who set out his objections by comparing several texts in the NIV 1984 and the NIVI, an "inclusive language" NIV that had been published in 1996 in the U.K. by another publisher, which couldn't be sold legally in the U.S.⁶¹

Things escalated, with articles and public statements and caucusing, culminating in a May 1997 meeting in Colorado Springs between the International Bible Society, which owned the rights to the NIV, Zondervan its publisher, members of the

Committee for Bible Translation, and representatives of those opposed to gender inclusive translation.⁶² The joint statement from the meeting was a win for those opposed. But things didn't end there.

For their part, Christians for Biblical Equality urged the Bible Society to resume "aggressive efforts to update the North American edition of the NIV with gender-accurate language."⁶³

Complementarians, however, were divided. While the 1997 annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention and Presbyterian Church in America passed resolutions opposing gender-inclusive translations, several members of the CBMW Board of Reference, including Don Carson, resigned over the issue.⁶⁴

Both sides published books, with Carson's book, *The Inclusive-Language Debate*, re-

⁵⁸ AMS Staff, "Priscilla and Aquila comes of age," *Sydney Anglicans* (February 15, 2012), <https://sydneyanglicans.net/news/priscilla-and-aquila-comes-of-age>.

⁵⁹ "About," *Priscilla and Aquila Centre*, <https://paa.moore.edu.au/about/>.

⁶⁰ D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 29.

⁶¹ Carson, *Inclusive-Language Debate*, 27.

⁶² Who included James Dobson from Focus on the Family, Grudem, President of CBMW, and Piper, co-editor of *RBMW*.

⁶³ Timothy C. Morgan, "Biblical Feminist Press for Gender Inclusive NIV," *Christianity Today* (September 1, 1997), 78.

⁶⁴ Carson, *Inclusive-Language Debate*, 35.



leased in 1998 and with Grudem and Vern Poythress's book, *The Gender Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words*, appearing the following year. They published second edition of this work in 2004, *The TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy*, after Zondervan published a gender-neutral translation called *Today's New Testament Version* (TNIV), which, likely due to the opposition it encountered, never really took off and has since been discontinued.

The current NIV came out in 2011 and is a revised edition of that discontinued version.⁶⁵ Its translation committee included both complementarians and egalitarians.⁶⁶ And while some of the features that troubled opponents of the TNIV were changed, others remained.⁶⁷

As the story of the NIV unfolded, two new Bible versions were being produced that didn't adopt a gender-neutral approach.

The *Holman Christian Standard Bible*, now the *Christian Standard Bible*, first came out in 1999.⁶⁸ Its website says it "retains a traditional approach to translating gender language into English." For example, masculine terms (Father, Son, King) and male pronouns are retained when they refer to God; and the expression "son of man" is retained where it may have messianic implications. But it also accommodates changes to language:

where the Greek term *adelphoi* (brothers) clearly refers to all believers, it uses "brothers and sisters" and it doesn't use "man" or "he" when Scripture presents principles or generic examples that aren't limited to males.⁶⁹

Similarly, the *English Standard Version* was first published in 2001, after starting its life in 1997 when Crossway bought the rights to the Revised Standard Version.⁷⁰ Its website states that "in the area of gender language, the goal of the ESV is to render literally what is in the original."⁷¹

All this to say that all Bible translators and publishers (especially in the West) must now work out how they'll approach gender in the translation process and publicly state their gender translation philosophy, and we as readers must be discerning.

THE REACH AND REASON FOR THE BIBLICAL DIFFERENCES

At this point, I want to move on to some areas where the history is still being written; to debates among those who call themselves "complementarian."

The reach of the biblical differences

The first category are debates about the *reach* of complementarianism. How far can you stretch the notion of complementarianism before you stop being comple-

mentarian or how soft are the boundaries? These are questions of application.

The most obvious one is the issue of women teaching mixed congregations. This view has been advocated, for example, by Kathy Keller, speaking from her American Presbyterian context. She argued in her 2012 book, *Jesus, Justice and Gender Roles: A Case of Gender Roles in Ministry*, that "anything that an undominated man is allowed to do, a woman is also allowed to do."⁷²

Or take John Dickson's view in several editions of his book, *Hearing Her Voice*,⁷³ first published in 2012, saying that the Greek word Paul used for "teach" in 1 Timothy 2:12 actually means "laying down and preserving" or "transmitting intact" the apostolic deposit. He argued that since this is not what happens in most modern sermons, women can preach today. Matthias Media responded to this argument with a book in 2014 called *Women, Sermons and the Bible*,⁷⁴ edited by Peter Bolt and Tony Payne, with essays by Peter Tong, Dani Treweek, Peter Bolt, Tony Payne, Lionel Windsor, Mark Thompson, and me.

All these discussions address the *reach* of the biblical gender roles.

The reason for the biblical differences

The next category of debates addresses the *reason* for the biblical differences between the sexes. Why is it that God's word

assigns different roles and responsibilities to women and men?

Under this heading, I would put the debate about the Trinity that erupted in 2016. In early June that year Liam Goligher, who was a Presbyterian minister at the time, posted two articles at the beginning of what became the "2016 Trinity Controversy." The first was titled, "Is it okay to teach a complementarianism based on Eternal Subordination?"; and the second, "Reinventing God." Others, such as Carl Trueman, soon joined the discussion.

The two main figures of the debate were Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware. Both of whom, to varying degrees, subsequently modified their views in light of criticism. As Mark Thompson pointed out in his June 9, 2016 blog, the debate had arisen "it must be admitted, because of overstatement and lack of precision in some of its advocates."⁷⁵

The ensuing discussion spread far beyond the narrow issue of complementarianism, with one aspect of the debate dealing with how Paul intended the analogy in 1 Corinthians 11:3 to operate in terms of the relationship between men and women and that between the persons of the Trinity, especially in respect of their eternal relations.

In terms of the relevance of the debate for the *history of complementarianism*, Stephen Wellum last year pointed out that

⁶⁵ Denny Burk, "The Translation of Gender Terminology in the NIV 2011," *JBMW* 16.2 (Spring 2011), 18.

⁶⁶ "Meet the Translators," *NIV*, <https://www.thenivbible.com/niv-translators/>.

⁶⁷ See Burk, "Translation of Gender Terminology," 17–33.

⁶⁸ Vern S. Poythress, "Gender-Neutral Bible Translations, some twenty years later," *WTJ* 84 (2022): 54.

⁶⁹ Summarised from "FAQ" *Christian Standard Bible*, <https://csbible.com/about-the-csb/faqs/#faq/what-is-the-christian-standard-bible-approach-on-translating-gender-language>.

⁷⁰ "The History of the ESV," Crossway (October 8, 2021), https://www.crossway.org/articles/the-history-of-the-esv/?srsltid=AfmBOoqaAYKqucvxTxUnaH4bQ-x-ibZZrsrLr4fngdph5S118lXsEeW_.

⁷¹ "10 Things you Should Know about the ESV Translation," Crossway (February 18, 2021), https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-the-esv-translation/?srsltid=AfmBOop41yZcMcnPXuNzzsObSekFmW40b_7VvYGhW36QdV_bsq4lTwQ; Although, see David Brunn, "Gender in Bible Translation: A Crucial Issue Still Mired in Misunderstanding," *Themelios* 49.1 (April 2024), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/gender-in-bible-translation-a-crucial-issue-still-mired-in-misunderstanding/>

⁷² Kathy Keller, *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles: A Case for Gender Roles in Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 12.

⁷³ John P. Dickson, *Hearing Her Voice: A Biblical Invitation for Women to Preach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012, 2014).

⁷⁴ *Women, Sermons and the Bible: Essays Interacting with John Dickson's Hearing Her Voice*, eds. Tony Payne and Peter Bolt (Sydney: Mathias Media, 2014).

⁷⁵ Mark Thompson, "ERS: Is there order in the Trinity?," *Theological Theology* (June 9, 2016), <https://markdthompson.blogspot.com/2016/06/ers-is-there-order-in-trinity.html>.

... an ERAS [Eternal Relations of Authority and Submission] view of the Trinity is not required to uphold a complementarian view. In fact, a complementarian view stands on its own due to the teaching of Scripture.⁷⁶

The other current in-house debate among complementarians is between two camps variously labelled “thin,” “narrow,” or “ideological” and “thick,” “broad,” or “natural.”

The questions under consideration are ones like: “apart from their bodies, are men and women basically the same, except for the fact that God has assigned them different roles and responsibilities in marriage and the church, in which case, God’s different demands to men and women are somewhat arbitrary or at least appear to be?” (This is the thin-narrow-ideological group.) Or “is there a deep connection between *who* and *how* God has made us to be as men and women *and* his intentions for us in the roles and relationships in which he places us in marriage, the church, and, in some respect, in all of life?”

RESPONDING TO THIRD WAVE FEMINISM AND LGBTQ+

If there are essential differences between men and women (besides our bodies), what are they? The need for clarity on these matters is even more pressing because our social context has changed.

Whereas in the early days of the debate between egalitarians and complementarians, the major social force both sides

were reckoning with was second-wave feminism, now we’re in the unlikely situation where second-wave feminists like Germain Greer and J. K. Rowling share common ground with Bible-believing Christians in opposing the so-called “right” of transwomen (biological males) to access “women’s only” spaces; and meanwhile, third-wave feminists side with transwomen. And of course, that’s not all that’s changed.

Discovering Biblical Equality, third edition (2021)

Some of these changes are evident in the third edition of the orange book, which is now blue and green: *Discovering Biblical Equality*, published in 2021. I want to mention two aspects of the new edition worth noting.

First, in the old orange book, there is a full chapter arguing against the claim that “the acceptance of egalitarianism logically lead[s] to acceptance of homosexuality” and that there is a hermeneutical “slippery slope” from the former to the latter.⁷⁷ But in the latest edition, Ronald Pierce, who’s been an editor of all three editions, writes a chapter on same-sex marriage in which he admits that the slippery slope sometimes *does* exist, explaining that when he became an egalitarian:

One of my colleagues predicted that I would endorse same-sex marriage within ten years because of the “interpretive method” that led me to advocate for gender equality. This



slippery slope argument is still commonly heard—and for some this has been their experience.⁷⁸

And while he clearly holds a non-affirming view on same-sex marriage, he is still prepared to speak of “affirming and nonaffirming evangelicals” and the plausibility of affirming arguments being “sufficient to warrant further consideration.”⁷⁹ Bear in mind, CBE *came into existence* after a split with the Women’s Caucus over homosexuality.

The second development in latest edition is the inclusion of two essays that reject gender essentialism,⁸⁰ which Christa McKirland explains in her essay is

“the belief that males and females are born with distinctively different natures, determined biologically rather than culturally. [...]” In other words, men and women are essentially different on the basis of being

a man or a woman [where] there are male persons who are meant to act like men (masculinity) and there are female persons who are meant to act like women (femininity).⁸¹

The Nashville Statement (2017)

It was in the context of these same social changes that CBMW in 2017 produced *The Nashville Statement*, which contains a Preamble, fourteen affirmations, and with corresponding denials. *Nashville* includes statements about God’s design for marriage being between one man and one woman, the equality of male and female as image-bearers, the sinfulness of same-sex attraction and transgender identity, and the hope for us all in the gospel.

Nashville is not a replacement for *Danvers*. Whereas *Danvers* responded to evangelical feminism (as the subtitle of *RBMW* says), the *Nashville Statement*

⁷⁶ Stephen Wellem, “Does Complementarianism Depend on ERAS?: A Response to Kevin Giles ‘The Trinity Argument for Women’s Subordination,’” *Eikon* 5.21 (Spring 2023): 62.

⁷⁷ William J. Webb, “Gender Equality and Homosexuality,” *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 2nd ed., 410–413.

⁷⁸ Ronald W. Pierce, “Biblical Equality and Same-Sex Marriage,” *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 3rd ed., 491 (italics added).

⁷⁹ Pierce, “Biblical Equality,” 506.

⁸⁰ M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, “Gender Differences and Biblical Interpretation: A View from the Social Sciences,” *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 3rd ed., 653.

⁸¹ Christa McKirland, “Image of God and Divine Presence: A Critique of Gender Essentialism,” *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 3rd ed., 283.

seeks to uphold “biblical sexuality” for Christians, churches, and ministries now living in a changed culture, where even the categories of male and female and what they mean are under dispute.

And this new social context means there are new questions being asked about what it means to be male and female, and I think the answers to these questions are still being written. They’re not yet part of the *history* of complementarianism. But as Katie McCoy points out in her recent essay entitled “What it means to be male and female”:

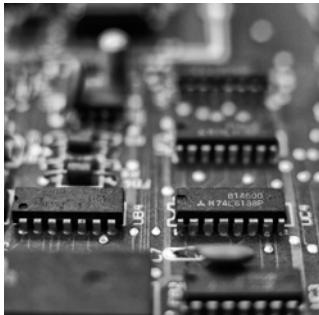
However, the digital din of debate over evangelical gender roles has been nearly eclipsed by the clamor of a new rhetoric, with concepts like gender fluidity, gender nonconformity, and transgenderism rapidly transposing cultural mores. Before one can answer the question of what ministries a woman can fulfill in the church, one must now first define what a woman is. Before one can defend marriage as a covenant between male and female, one must be prepared to stipulate that maleness and femaleness are unalterably determined at birth. In short, conversations on *how* one expresses one’s gender risk falling on deaf ears apart from a clear defense of *why* gender differentiation matters at all. And in a society that increasingly accepts the idea that one’s biology is irrelevant to determine one’s gender, answering this *why* seems more urgent than ever.³²



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³² Katie J. McCoy, “What it means to be male and female,” in *Created in the Image of God*, ed. David S. Dockery (New York, NY: Forefront Books, 2023), 142–143 (emphasis original).





Humanity, Hope, and the Future: A Comparative Anthropology of Christianity and Transhumanism

In an age marked by rapid technological advancement and profound ethical questions, the search for human meaning remains central. Both Christianity and transhumanism offer comprehensive visions of what it means to be human, what our destiny is, and how we might achieve it. These two worldviews – one rooted in ancient sacred texts and divine revelation, the other in cutting-edge science and futurist imagination – offer contrasting anthropologies that nonetheless share some intriguing parallels. This essay examines the intersection of anthropology and Christianity, as well as their relationship with transhumanism, comparing their perspectives on human origins,

nature, purpose, suffering, and destiny, while highlighting both their convergences and irreconcilable tensions.

HUMAN ORIGINS: DIVINE CREATION VS. EVOLUTIONARY EMERGENCE

At the heart of any anthropology is the question of where we come from. Christianity affirms that God creates human beings in His own image. Genesis 1:26-27 declares, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” This concept, known as the *imago Dei*, suggests that humans possess inherent dignity, moral agency, rationality, and a spiritual nature that reflects God’s character. Humanity, though creat-

ed good, has fallen through sin, introducing moral and existential brokenness into the human condition.

Transhumanism, by contrast, embraces a secular evolutionary framework. Humanity, in this view, is the current stage of a long biological process shaped by natural selection. There is no divine design; instead, humans are products of random mutations and environmental pressures. However, transhumanists argue that we now stand at the threshold of directing our own evolution through technological innovation — particularly artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and cybernetic augmentation.

While Christianity sees human origins as sacred and purposeful, transhumanism sees them as contingent, malleable, and provisional. This difference profoundly shapes each worldview’s understanding of human value and destiny.

THE NATURE OF THE HUMAN PERSON: BODY AND SOUL OR BIOLOGICAL MECHANISM?

Christian anthropology affirms a dualistic view of the human person: a union of body and soul. The soul is immortal, endowed with reason, will, and the capacity for communion with God. Even as the body decays and dies, the soul persists, and its destiny lies beyond material reality. Human dignity, in this view, is inherent and unchanging because it is derived from our being made in God’s image.

Transhumanism generally espouses a materialist view of the human person. While some transhumanists entertain the idea of “mind uploading” or digital conscious-

ness, these concepts are typically grounded in the assumption that the mind is essentially the product of the brain — a biological computer. In this view, the self is emergent from complex physical processes and, therefore, can be replicated or enhanced through technological means.

This leads to an important contrast: while Christianity sees human nature as fixed and inviolable in its spiritual core, transhumanism sees it as fluid, modifiable, and upgradeable. For Christians, tampering too deeply with human nature risks violating the sacred order. For transhumanists, refusing to evolve is tantamount to human stagnation.

THE PURPOSE OF LIFE: HOLINESS OR ENHANCEMENT?

The question of purpose is one of the most profound in both theology and philosophy. Christianity teaches that the purpose of life is to know, love, and serve God. Human beings are called to holiness, moral growth, and participation in divine life. The Christian path is marked by a transformation not merely of the mind or body, but of the heart and soul. As Romans 12:2 puts it, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Life is a pilgrimage toward communion with God and others, culminating in eternal life.

Transhumanism, on the other hand, proposes a very different telos. Its aim is the self-directed evolution of humanity, the radical improvement of human capacities, and eventually, the transcendence of biology itself. Technologies such as brain-computer interfaces, anti-aging treatments, and genetic modification are not merely tools for healing; they are in-

struments of progress toward a post-human future.

While both frameworks speak of transformation, the Christian transformation is moral and spiritual, grounded in divine grace. The transhumanist transformation is technical and physical, grounded in human ingenuity. One seeks salvation through faith and grace, the other through science and innovation.

SUFFERING AND DEATH: REDEMPTIVE MYSTERY OR TECHNICAL PROBLEM?

A critical divergence between these anthropologies lies in their differing perspectives on suffering and death. Christianity teaches that suffering, while not part of God's original plan, can have redemptive value. Christ's suffering and resurrection give suffering a new meaning: it becomes a path to deeper love, humility, and union with God. Death, the last enemy, is defeated not through human effort but through Christ's resurrection. As 1 Corinthians 15:55 asks, "Where, O death, is your victory?"

Transhumanism views suffering as a problem to be solved. Whether through medical innovation, AI-assisted therapy, or even neural implants that alter mood and cognition, transhumanism seeks to eliminate suffering entirely. Death itself is seen not as a metaphysical event but as a biological malfunction — potentially curable through cryonics, mind uploading, or radical life extension.

Here, the tension is stark: Christianity accepts limits as part of a fallen world destined for divine redemption. Transhumanism views limits as obstacles to be overcome, often without regard

for metaphysical or moral boundaries. While Christianity dignifies suffering, transhumanism strives to erase it.

ETHICS AND COMMUNITY: DIVINE LAW VS. HUMAN AUTONOMY

Christian ethics are grounded in divine law, revelation, and the teachings of Christ. The moral life is communal, centered on love of God and neighbor. Human enhancement technologies are evaluated through a moral lens that considers the sanctity of life, the dignity of the human person, and the good of the broader community — especially the poor and vulnerable.

Transhumanist ethics are often utilitarian and based on autonomy. If an individual consents to an enhancement and it increases happiness or reduces suffering, it is generally deemed permissible. Some forms of transhumanism also flirt with elitism, as access to enhancement technologies may be limited to the wealthy or powerful. This raises concerns about justice and the widening of inequality.

Where Christianity emphasizes humility, restraint, and ethical limits, transhumanism promotes autonomy, ambition, and expansion. The Christian moral tradition is skeptical of "playing God"; transhumanism often embraces it.

FINAL DESTINY: RESURRECTION OR TECHNOLOGICAL IMMORTALITY?

Perhaps the most dramatic contrast lies in their respective eschatologies — their visions of the end.

Christianity teaches that the world and humanity will be redeemed and trans-

... the Christian vision offers a critical counterpoint — one that calls for humility, ethical discernment, and a deep reverence for the mystery of human life.

formed by God. The resurrection of the dead and the promise of the New Heaven and New Earth (Revelation 21) reveal an eternal destiny that is gifted, not earned. Eternal life is not the result of human effort but of divine grace.

Transhumanism, in contrast, often envisions a technological eschaton — a future in which humans evolve into post-human or immortal beings through the singularity, digital consciousness, or advanced biotechnology. Salvation becomes a human project. Eternal life, if attainable, is engineered, not bestowed.

The two narratives share a hope for transcendence, but their means and meanings are radically different. Christianity looks upward, to God; transhumanism looks forward, to human progress.

CONCLUSION: COMPETING VISIONS OF THE HUMAN FUTURE

The anthropology of Christianity and transhumanism represent two of the most potent visions of the human condition available today. Both grapple with our

deepest longings — for meaning, transformation, liberation from suffering, and eternal life. Yet they propose fundamentally different routes to fulfillment.

Christianity affirms that human dignity is grounded in our creation by God and that our transformation comes through grace, not technology. It teaches that suffering can be redemptive, and death a passage to eternal communion with the divine. Transhumanism, by contrast, locates human value in potential and performance, seeks transformation through technology, and views death as a problem to be overcome.

As society races toward an increasingly technological future, the Christian vision offers a critical counterpoint — one that calls for humility, ethical discernment, and a deep reverence for the mystery of human life. In the end, the question each worldview must answer is not only what can we become, but also who are we meant to be? 

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Do the Claims of A.I. Replace Orthodox Christianity? The Theological Demands of Transhumanism

Can humans live forever? Can they create a technology to transcend their own mortality? What will Artificial Intelligence become?

Recently Peter Thiel, one of the most prominent technological innovators and tech-founders in Silicon Valley, joined Ross Douthat of the *New York Times* to discuss the future of technology. In addition to being a leader in technology, Peter Thiel has also made a name for himself in the realm of ideas, especially in the more conservative wing of Silicon Valley.

At one point in the interview, Douthat asks Thiel about anti-aging research:

"What does it mean to say we need to take more risks in anti-aging research? Does it mean that the

F.D.A. has to step back and say: Anyone who has a new treatment for Alzheimer's can go ahead and sell it on the open market? What does risk in the medical space look like?"

Thiel responds by saying we're probably not taking enough risks:

"If you have some fatal disease, there are probably a lot more risks you can take. There are a lot more risks the researchers can take. Culturally, what I imagine it looks like is early modernity where people thought we would cure diseases. They thought we would have radical life extension. Immortality was part of the project of early modernity."

Of which he mentions Francis Bacon and Condorcet. He continues, "maybe it

was anti-Christian, maybe it was downstream of Christianity. It was competitive." Then he adds this,

"If Christianity promised you a physical resurrection, science was not going to succeed unless it promised you the exact same thing. I remember 1999 or 2000, when we were running PayPal, one of my co-founders, Luke Nosek — he was into Alcor and cryonics and that people should freeze themselves. And we had one day where we took the whole company to a freezing party. You know a Tupperware party? People sell Tupperware policies. At a freezing party, they sell . . ."

At this point Ross Douthat interjects, "Was it just their heads? What was going to be frozen?"

"You could get a full body or just a head,"

Thiel responds.

And Douthat muses back, "The 'just the head' option was cheaper."

This is cryonics, freezing — really freezing — freezing the human body or maybe even just the human head in hopes of an eventual extension of life later on.

Inevitably, their conversation turned to artificial intelligence. If I am going to listen to anyone about Artificial Intelligence, I'm going to be very interested in what Peter Thiel thinks. Discussing the future of AI, Thiel said that we need a proper framework to understand the impact of this technology: "My stupid answer is: It's more than a nothing burger, and it's less than the total transformation of our society."

whatever transhumanism, techno-optimism, or the AI revolution offers, it's basically a replacement for the influence of orthodox Christianity.

That's a pretty big spectrum. Thiel then cited the development of the personal computer as a parallel, noting AI's impact could well be on that scale. Regarding the limits of AI, Thiel referenced the "gating factor," or the factor that keeps progress from speeding up or breaking through. Like closing a gate, the gating factor is a limiter on technological progress.

A lot of the transhumanists don't want to accept a gating factor. Many assume that, given enough time, even any current limits can be overcome. But Peter Thiel openly acknowledged that whatever transhumanism, techno-optimism, or the AI revolution offers, it's basically a replacement for the influence of orthodox Christianity. To this end he said:

"The critique orthodox Christianity has of this, is these things don't go far enough. That transhumanism is just changing your body, but you also need to transform your soul, and you

need to transform your whole self."

That's a pretty key insight coming from someone who is not identified with orthodox Christianity. Yet Thiel sees orthodox Christianity and recognizes that it demands more than "longer this" or "longer that." It demands more than a "longer me." It demands more, and promises more, than this continued physical existence. It is nothing short of total transformation. That is a very interesting acknowledgement. These secular substitutes cannot bring or promise anything close..

Though Peter Thiel comes from a differ-

ent place than me in many ways, he is onto something when he says, in his own worldview analysis, that when you look at Europe, there are only three major worldviews still available — it's Greta Thunberg Green, Sharia Law, or Totalitarian Communism:

"I want to say it's the only thing people still believe in Europe. They believe in the green thing more than the Islamic Sharia law or more than the Chinese communist totalitarian takeover." I think that's very insightful. When Christianity goes into recession, it's not replaced by nothing. Thiel is absolutely right that in Europe,

Christianity has been replaced by these three things.

The big question is, what is the trajectory of the United States? I think you could make the argument that something very similar to this could take place as a contest of worldviews in the aftermath of a declining Christianity in the U.S. If indeed Christianity continues to recede and goes into an even more pronounced recession in the United States, it will not be replaced by nothing. It is going to be replaced with something. And those somethings are very likely to be already implemented elsewhere in the world.

The conversation took a fascinating turn when the issue of Calvinism came up. Where does Calvinism emerge in a conversation with Peter Thiel and Ross Douthat? It has to do with God's intervention in history.

Ross Douthat said that God is behind Jesus Christ entering history, because God was not going to leave us in "a stagnationist, decadent Roman Empire . . . at some point, God is going to step in."

Peter Thiel responded, "I'm not that Calvinist."



To which Ross Douthat retorted, “That’s not Calvinism, though. That’s just Christianity. God will not leave us eternally staring into screens and being lectured by Greta Thunberg. He will not abandon us to that fate.”

Put that on a bumper sticker.

Amidst all this transhumanism, techno-optimism, and secular confusion that is replacing Christianity in the minds and hearts of so many, it is really important that we recognize there are limited replacements to Christianity. Peter Thiel’s observation of Europe being dominated by either environmentalism, Islamism, or Marxism, is quite apt. Regrettably, many of these ideologies are already baked into the thinking of a larger number of Americans than you may want to think.

It can be a temptation to see so much in the media these days and say, “That’s absolutely nuts,” but that is what we said about something else two weeks ago. This is the way a culture of confusion works. It just gets more confused and then it moves on to confusing something else.

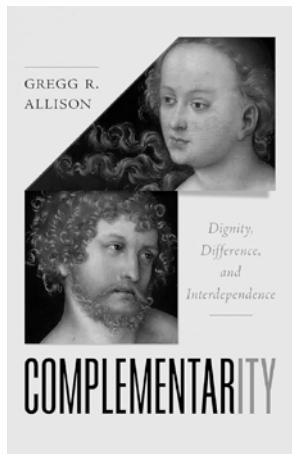
Our call is not Christianity and anything else. It is the Christian biblical revelation, it is the gospel of Jesus Christ over and against everything else.

It is Christ and nothing else, because Christ is everything. 

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., is President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and is a CBMW council member.

BOOK
REVIEW

Complementarity: Dignity, Difference, and Interdependence: A Review Essay



Gregg R. Allison. *Complementarity: Dignity, Difference, and Interdependence*. Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2025.

Gregg Allison's latest book, *Complementarity: Dignity, Difference, and Interdependence*, is a substantial examination of the Bible's teaching on how men and women exist in the world *as men and women*. Despite the title, it is not intended to promote complementarianism. Rather, *Complementarity*'s goal is to demonstrate a basic biblical anthropology from which any and all applications should be derived, whether complementarian or egalitarian.

Allison's thesis is that God has indeed created humanity after a sexually dimorphic order. This design underlies every human's way of being, and it is necessary for collective flourishing. Every human is a fundamentally "gendered being," even in their "consciousness" and "relationship

with God" (7). Allison is clear that this gendered life is complementary. Men and women "fill out and mutually support one another." This does not mean that individuals as such are in need of such completing (8). Instead, Allison is speaking corporately and societally. And this goes beyond the marital union. Human life in its entirety, as it is lived "familiarily, vocationally, and ecclesiastically" (6), should also be expressed in a sexually complementary fashion.

So far so complementarian. But Allison goes on to make clear that this framework for understanding does not entail complementarianism. It does not, by itself, answer questions about ministerial ordination or leadership in the family. *Complementarity* will even attempt to correct some aspects of the conventional form of complementarianism that has been expressed by the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW). In fact, Allison's most strident criticisms will be leveled at what he calls the traditional position — "traditional sex polarity" — where sexual differentiation is largely defined by the conviction that men are superior to women (122). Allison is firmly convinced that the majority of the Christian tradition has been in serious error on this point. He even confesses a certain amount of "blindness" and "bias" on his own part, due to his "sex identity" and the "entrenched prejudice" of the tradition in which he was initially formed (10–11). He hopes that his proposal of complementarity (rather than complementarianism) will help build bridges between evangelicals, even as he rejects the possibility of a "third way" or "middle way" between complementarianism

and egalitarianism (25). He repeatedly states that he will not be adjudicating between these two positions and even suggests that complementarity might be able to support either perspective. Complementarity, then, is a more basic way of understanding human existence itself. Applying any principles of that existence to its actual living is an exercise which the book largely leaves for the reader to decide.

THESIS AND FRAMEWORK

At the outset, Allison defines "complementarity" in the following way: "Complementarity is God's design for his male and female image bearers to fill out and mutually support one another relationally, familiarily, vocationally, and ecclesiastically for their individual and corporate flourishing." He gives this definition several times in close proximity (xiii, 1, 6, 20), giving it the feel of a sort of mission statement. It is a holistic definition, applying to both individuals and relational units, to the family, civil and economic society, and the church. He also emphasizes three controlling principles, "equal dignity, significant differentiation, and flourishing interdependence" (7). These principles could be summarized (by me) in the following elementary way: men and women are equal; men and women are different; and men and women need one another's differences in order to reach humanity's collective highest good. This is the basic thesis which *Complementarity* will defend and apply.

If applied to contemporary political controversies, Allison's proposal will strike evangelical readers as typically complementarian. After all, he is arguing that

men and women are not interchangeable and that their gendered existence is good and necessary. Their differences complement one another in God's great design. But it quickly becomes apparent that Allison wishes to distinguish his own project from complementarianism. "Complementarity is neither complementarianism nor egalitarianism" (23). Allison also denies that he is offering "a third- or middle-way position between these two views" (25). Still, things are not so clean-cut. Allison also hopes to "extend a bridge across the chasm separating evangelical Christian from evangelical Christian and evangelical churches from evangelical churches" (8–9). The immediate context of this quote shows that he is referring to egalitarians and complementarians. And at least one of his book endorsers, D. A. Carson, asserts that Allison is "choosing a third option." While Allison cannot be faulted for Carson's summary, it does illustrate the likelihood of potential confusion among readers. Is *Complementarity* a "third option," distinct from egalitarianism and complementarianism, or not?

To clarify this question, we can point to the visual diagram offered on page 24. There, "complementarity" sits underneath both "complementarianism" and "egalitarianism," with both potentially being able to draw from it. What Allison is picturing is the concept that complementarianism and egalitarianism are schools of thought or theological systems which can draw from his project, a biblical-theological explanation of how men and women exist in God's world. Allison's project is antecedent to any later systematic organization and application. He repeatedly states that he will "not adjudicate between"

complementarianism and egalitarianism (xv, 21, 26). While readers might detect something like a "third option," what is really going on is that Allison is attempting to demonstrate a set of biblical values and principles which will then create certain directives and boundaries for any later applications. This framework can include proponents of both complementarianism and egalitarianism. Notably, it will *exclude* proponents of what Allison calls "the traditional view" (6) as well as some more radical feminists and egalitarians. This is the "bridge" that can be built, as well as the common border wall.

Allison's strongest criticisms are actually aimed at "the traditional view." The equality of the sexes is one of his highest priorities, and he uses the language of moral denunciation and even visceral revulsion when discussing those who advocate male superiority (3, 11, 42). "I have felt deep disgust," he writes, "at how far we have missed and even trampled upon what I consider to be God's design for the two sexes he creates . . ." (11).

THE HISTORICAL SURVEY

In order to show the distinctive nature of complementarity, Allison next moves to a lengthy historical section. He seeks to show the various ways that differences between the sexes have been explained. He organizes them according to a set of categories taken from Prudence Allen (29). As he works through Allen's work, he also lists a taxonomy of the ways in which sexual difference has been explained. These are: 1) sex unity, 2) sex neutrality, 3) traditional sex polarity, where the male is set forth as superior, 4) reverse sex polarity, where the female is

set forth as superior, and 5) sex complementarity. Allison claims the "integral" variety of sex complementarity for his own position (32). The third position, "traditional sex polarity," is the position he is most concerned to rebut. This position maintains male superiority in a number of ways, especially by appeals to Aristotelian arguments about male and female reproductive development and the female sex's supposed inability to possess proper wisdom and virtue (32–40). These Aristotelian hallmarks appear in champions of the Christian tradition like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Allison believes that these are mistaken and largely rejected by all contemporary theological writers. Since this is the case, he argues that appeals to the Christian tradition on matters of complementarity need to be more critically examined and, in some cases, greatly modified.

This historical section is impressive in scope as it seeks to survey the ancient pagan world and the full history of Christianity, from the early church to modernity. Such a project could be valuable as a standalone work. Unfortunately, this section is overly dependent upon the work of secondary sources, especially Prudence Allen's *The Concept of Woman*. Over the course of 90 pages, 73 have footnotes directing the reader to Allen. More than once, she is footnoted on every page for a sequence of ten successive pages. Even when interacting with twentieth-century writers like Dietrich von Hildebrand and Jacques Maritain, Allison defers to the summary and interpretation of secondary sources, usually Allen.

On a few occasions, the historical treat-

ment contains significant errors. Commenting on the contribution of Martin Luther, Allison asserts that Luther "toppled the entrenched concept of human beings as divided into two categories according to different natures: men and women, and priests." He then makes the surprising claim that, "both men and women alike can carry out priestly duties," of which he includes, "teach and preach the Word of God" and "administer the Lord's Supper" (96). Allison does add a caveat, "At the same time, Luther retained the office of ministry with traditional male leadership roles" (97). Still, on its face, this gives the impression that Luther was toppling traditional divisions between the sexes and that he allowed women to preach and even administer the sacrament, even while declining to formally ordain them. It is not obvious if Allison is making a historical claim or observing a potential contemporary application inspired from Luther's theology. In a later part of the book, Allison returns to this part of Luther's thought and also gives the impression that it could be used to allow for both women and men "preaching and/or administering the sacraments" (491). It is our "various ecclesial and denominational distinctives" which will give the "requirements for those who administer them," again indicating a measure of distance between those distinctives and Luther's toppling theology (491). The relevant footnotes here once again point to a secondary source. But when one goes directly to Luther, things look a bit different. The material in question comes from his treatise *Concerning the Ministry*. Luther does indeed state there that "all Christians are priests in equal

degree,”¹ and he also does list various offices which follow from this, including preaching and administering the sacraments. However, Luther is not really discussing the relationship between men and women. Instead, he is opposing the Roman Catholic notion of an ontological sacerdotal order, the indelible character imparted through the apostolic laying on of hands. When he gets to the matter of ordination, Luther explains that “the community” chooses representative leaders to perform the actions “in the name of all.”² The various offices of the universal priesthood, actions like preaching and administering the sacraments, are “the common rights of Christians,” but, importantly, they are not actually carried out by each and every Christian. Instead, they are carried out by the clergy. And ordinarily speaking, they are only carried out by the clergy. This point was so important that it made its way into the Augsburg Confession. The universal priesthood does not do away with the reality of ministerial orders (Augsburg Confession, Article XIV, see also the Defense of the Augsburg Confession, Article XIV). For Luther, ordained ministry continued to be exclusively male. His justifications for this rule come from New Testament exegesis and his convictions about how men and women relate to one another in social organizations. When Luther mentions things like women being able to engage in priestly activities “in time of emergency,”³ he is not “toppling” any sort of traditional sex polarity. What’s actually going on is a sort of rhetorical appeal to an extreme in order to high-

light a point. Luther is presuming a traditional sex polarity in order to *humble* the claims of Rome’s so-called spiritual estate. In cases of absolute necessity, absolutely *anyone* can perform priestly functions. Since this is possible, then no ecclesiastical body can appeal to its clergy as an essential conduit of salvation. In ordinary times, however, ordinary rules and considerations apply.

A second mistaken historical interaction appears immediately afterwards in a discussion on John Calvin. Allison gives the judgment that Calvin both emphasized the equality of women and men while also maintaining that women are “innately inferior to men.” He does not seek to explain how Calvin may have thought these two commitments to be consistent, or even how they may be a variety of complementarity, but rather leaves the reader with the impression that Calvin was something of a work in progress. “[T]heological anthropology lagged behind the five *solas*,” Allison writes, but “it may be argued that doctrines such as the priesthood of all believers and the clarity of Scripture provided a solid foundation for later developments . . .” (99). The metaphor of lagging behind a potential motion of development indicates an assumption of proper progress. Some elements of the Reformation moved appropriately forward, while others took a bit longer to catch up. This sort of argument brings with it a number of assumptions about what full equality must mean, as well as history’s final end.

Allison does give several direct state-

ments from John Calvin, but one of them is highly questionable. He quotes Calvin as saying, “God did not create two ‘beings’ of equal standing, but added to man a lesser helpmeet” (98). The source is Calvin’s Commentary on 1 Timothy 2:13, and Allison even supplies the Latin text. But where Allison renders it “two ‘beings’ of equal standing,” the Latin shows “duo capita” and “aequa potestate.” *Capita* is not usually translated as “being” but rather “head.” And *potestas* typically carried something of a political connotation. Calvin is not here denying that man and woman are equal “beings” but rather that they are equal “heads.” And the “standing” in view is not one of essence but of socio-political power. Allison introduces this quote as being an occasion where Calvin “more clearly” stated his view, but the translation obscures matters considerably. Why did Allison choose to translate Calvin in such a peculiar way?

There are several relevant and interesting sources from church history which do not appear in the historical survey. Andrew Willet and Gisbertus Voetius both directly criticized Aristotle’s sex polarity (see Willet *Hexapla in Genesin & Exodum*, 232–33, and Voetius, “Concerning Women” in *Ecclesiastical Politics*, vol 3, 181–82). Bishop John Aylmer’s response to John Knox, entitled *A Harbor for Faithful and True Subjects Against the Late-Blown Blast*, also contains important arguments about the “regiment of women,” and how it does not contradict the domestic headship of the husband or the practice of only ordaining men in the church. Althusius, in his important work *Politica*, also grants women the right to participate in political governance (*Politica*, chapt. 7). While each of these sources retain a hierarchical

understanding of men and women, they do not rely upon peculiarly Aristotelian assumptions about natural philosophy, human physiology, or virtue. And they do exhibit features of complementarity. They are also figures within the mainstream of the Protestant and Reformed tradition, thus making them to be of interest for modern evangelicals.

Allison’s historical survey then presents several provocative and controversial claims which need stronger substantiation. The constant use of modern historians may be exerting undue influence on his understanding of Christian history, perhaps even his understanding of the “traditional” position. The sixteenth and seventeenth-century Protestant theologians especially deserve to be studied further. I believe that a close attention to traditional theologians will show that the various “basic theories of sex identity” are not mutually exclusive of one another. The majority Christian tradition actually combined elements of what is called “traditional sex polarity” with complementarity, and it did not always rely upon the more questionable (and objectionable) elements of Aristotle which often loom large in these debates. This is particularly true of the English and Dutch Reformation theologians.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

The strongest section of *Complementarity* is certainly the fourth, “Biblical Considerations.” Allison demonstrates a laudable familiarity with and understanding of the state of biblical scholarship as he works through nearly every relevant Scriptural section having to do with the relationship of men and women. At 330 pages, this

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 40: *Church and Ministry II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 21.

² Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 40:34.

³ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 40:34.

section makes the book an important reference work for anyone interested in the state of exegetical discussion and debate around topics of sex and gender. I discovered that there were several passages of Scripture, particularly in the Old Testament, whose relevance I had not fully appreciated. Arguments for all sides will be considerably sharpened and improved after consulting with Allison's work. Pastors especially will find this material of interest.

Allison opens this section with a discussion on hermeneutics and the various "frameworks" which are employed in order to interpret the biblical text and to prioritize certain texts over others. He gives an opening caveat that he does not want this use of interpretative constructs to give the impression that Scripture is unclear (172). But at the same time, he does approvingly quote Alice Mathews who says, "The biblical text one chooses for one's starting point in the study of a doctrine or issue in Scripture becomes the lens through which one looks at all other texts" (222). This means that a few key biblical passages and theological convictions will prove decisive in interpreting the other large amount of biblical material.

For Allison, the most important sources of biblical material are the opening chapters of Genesis (190–222). Genesis 1–3 are commonly acknowledged to be foundational sources for the biblical perspective on men and women. Allison's particular argument is that the order and priority we give to either chapter 1 or chapter 2 will dramatically influence our understanding of God's intent for men and women. For Allison, Genesis 1 is the

great biblical source for the doctrine of human equality, as both men and women are created in the image of God and both are given the cultural mandate (200–201). He insists that this is "true of male and female human beings *qua* male and female human beings and not of male human beings *qua* husbands and female human beings *qua* wives" (201).

This is key for Allison's biblical-theological argument. Men and women should first and foremost be understood and addressed as individual human beings. This is their basic identity. Allison decisively states, "Husband/wife is a role, not an identity" (201). Genesis 2 is the chapter concerned with roles and marriage. For the overarching thesis of *Complementarity*, Genesis 1 must take a certain priority over Genesis 2.

I was not persuaded at this crucial point, however. The Apostle Paul very much seems to "start with" Genesis 2, even when discussing topics that go beyond the boundaries of the marital arrangement. For Paul, the details of Genesis 2 can determine questions of public decorum in the religious assembly (1 Cor 11:7–12), as well as ordination and teaching authority in the church (1 Tim 2:13). These are passages which Allison discusses in their own place, but he does not clearly explain how they do or do not support his own "framework." In fact, his discussion of those passages seems to move away from a full and direct exegesis and demonstration of the proper meaning, offering instead commentary on other commentators and interpretive frameworks without demonstrating a singular "correct" reading. As reasonable as "starting with" Genesis 1 may seem, the apostolic appeal to

and application of Genesis 2 surely holds greater weight.

Another reason I was unsatisfied with what appears to be Allison's controlling paradigm is that the categories of essence and function, or identity and role, are inseparable. An essence will lead to or at least dramatically effect a function, and many *roles* are indeed *identities*. (After all, there was never a time when God the Father was not a father.) Allison stresses that humans are always gendered, that they have a male way of being and a female way of being. But he wishes to keep this gendered essence separate, at least theoretically, from questions of reproduction and the marriage relationship. But is this really possible? For humans, "gender" is entirely bound up with "sex." A male is a male precisely because he possesses male reproductive organs. And any "female essence" is surely connected to the physiological effects of her reproductive cycle, as well as her intensely physical and intimate relationship to her children, particularly in their youngest years. Allison acknowledges this reality later on in the book, stating that "the ground for the distinction between these two types is biological" (462). But he does not connect this biology to the necessarily sexual relationship and its impact on human relationships and identity. In fact, fully distinct terms like "husband" and "wife" are relatively recent constructs of the English language. Ancient languages simply used "man" and "woman." This was even true for English not so long ago.⁴ Men and women are not automatically husbands and wives, but their gendered existence is nevertheless defined by a potential to per-

form the functions of a husband or a wife.

After all, when God says "It is not good for man to be alone," He is talking about the individual Adam, the man created in the image of God and not yet in a marriage relationship. He was not yet a husband. And it was "not good" for him to be alone. And when the Apostle Paul unveils the "great mystery" of human redemption, he appeals to marriage, the bond between Christ and the Church. Marriage is not simply one optional function or role among many. It is the chief biblical symbol for both creation and redemption, humanity's beginning and end. Marriage also appears in a spiritual capacity in Psalm 45, in the Song of Solomon, and in the closing chapters of Revelation. Conspicuously absent among the biblical passages treated by Allison are precisely those three.

Noting this prominent role for marriage in the Scriptures does not mean that single and celibate individuals are deficient in their humanity. They may be either tragic or heroic exceptions to the overall norm, depending on the specifics of their situation and calling. But in Christ, they will all of them, male and female, single and married, be both individually "sons" of God and collectively the "bride" of Christ. While these will be spiritual relationships, and will thus not manifest in precisely the same way as earthly ones, the parallel connection between essence and function remains, and the New Testament does appeal to them in order to influence the relationships among Christians in this life. Wives are only to submit to their own husbands, but Paul still uses

⁴ In the early modern English marriage rite, the minister pronounces the couple "man and wife." The Old English *wif* was simply the generic term for woman.

the language of a collective genus when speaking generally. He does so because he is employing rhetorically-symbolic archetypes.

It seems that Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 are not really in any sort of competition, not even hypothetically or theoretically. Neither has to take a governing priority over the other. Rather, they can be read consistently with one another. Men and women are equal in one respect and hierarchically arranged in another respect. Allison acknowledges that in the complementarian reading of 1 Corinthians 11:3–7, “Paul establishes a hierarchy among men/women or husbands/their wives” (389). I was unable to determine whether Allison believes that this reading of Paul is correct or incorrect. Both men and women are created in the image of God and given the cultural mandate, and yet Man and Woman were created in a certain order and with a particular end — an end that is realized, either naturally or supernaturally, in marriage.

So, while Allison’s exegetical work is substantial and valuable, many of the most challenging individual passages are ultimately decided by his “framework.” And his framework is underdeveloped in some important ways.

THEOLOGY AND APPLICATION

Complementarity concludes with several theological considerations and final points of application. Allison explains that his theory secures equality between men and women — “Banished are any and all notions of superiority and inferiority, advantage and disadvantage, dominance and subservience, and the like”

(465) — while also encouraging men and women to use their common capacities and properties in gendered ways (464). We could summarize this sort of directive as “complementarity without hierarchy.” Allison insists that men and women do have different contributions to make to overall human flourishing and that this difference is importantly gendered. He criticizes transgenderism, as well as any view that men and women are interchangeable. But Allison appears to deny the complementarian conviction that the male-gendered existence brings with it a natural fittingness towards leadership or authority. (He explicitly rejects this sort of argument on page 360.) He argues strongly that both men and women should be able to pursue vocations, and he seems to understand this as additional and external to the domestic vocation (505), even at one point describing vocation as “work” and “jobs” (506). Allison maintains that most, perhaps all, kinds of jobs can be appropriate for both men and women and that this question should be left to the individual to decide (506–7).

Complementarity attempts to avoid directly resolving the debate between complementarianism and egalitarianism. But at one point, Allison does tip his hand. He favors the interpretation of the New Testament which “supports both male and female deacons” (369). He does not make such an explicit statement when discussing elders, indicating that there is a difference in the Biblical text when it comes to the offices of deacons and elders. The passage dealing with deacons has features which show that the office is open to individuals from both sexes. The passages dealing with elders do not have these features. Thus, there is something that limits

the higher governing ecclesiastical office to men. At the end of the day, Allison will still be seen as a sort of complementarian.

CONCLUSION

Complementarity is an important book for how it collects the key areas of biblical and scholarly material that discuss human sexuality and the relationship between the sexes. If viewed as a reference book meant to help the pastor or teacher understand the full lay of the land, then it is very helpful. The Scripture index alone is worth the price of the book. But *Complementarity* is also important for the way it illustrates certain contemporary trends and attitudes, what is often referred to as “soft” or “narrow” complementarianism. Again and again, the great villain of Allison’s book is “traditional sex polarity,” the position which he believes is indeed the traditional position of the Christian Church. Quite unlike the manner in which he interacts with egalitarian scholarship, Allison feels free to criticize the traditional view in explicit and impassioned terms. Other important asymmetries also appear. Egalitarianism is not ruled out by *Complementarity*, but patriarchy is. A male-only presbyterate is not defended explicitly, but a diaconate open to men and women is.

I do not believe Allison is arguing for a third way between complementarianism and egalitarianism. That is not his goal. He largely does succeed in maintaining an objective posture towards both schools of thought without conflating or dismissing their various concerns. He really does believe that his biblical framework can be employed by advocates of ei-

ther perspective. But one still wonders if he thinks that “complementarity” should properly lead to one view or the other. If it truly need not imply either view, then is it actually *the* biblical perspective? Does it sufficiently explain the divine design and intention for domestic and ecclesiastical relations? Or does it teach us that the debate between complementarians and egalitarians is actually over a thing indifferent?

We should also think more deeply about what it means to build a bridge between complementarians and egalitarians while excluding traditional and hierarchical views. Should softer complementarians understand themselves to have more in common with egalitarians than they do with those complementarians who still maintain a sort of hierarchical view? And how “non-traditional” should complementarians wish to be? These can be uncomfortable questions, particularly in the church. But they are important questions, all the same. Allison’s *Complementarity* has raised them effectively. 

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REVIEWED BY DEIRDRE BUSCETTO

UnClobber: Rethinking our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality

RETHINKING OUR MISUSE OF
THE BIBLE ON HOMOSEXUALITYColby MARTIN
Foreword by Glennon Doyle Melton

Colby Martin. *UnClobber: Rethinking our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

INTRODUCTION

I did not hear the gospel until I was fifty-five years old. One of the pathologists I worked with in Gulfport, Mississippi came to saving faith and brought me the gospel. Two years later the Lord called me, gave me faith, justified me, and I embraced Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. One of the many sins the Lord saved me from was thirty-seven years of homosexuality. I praise God for his mercy and grace for me, a sinner. While I also praise him for the grace he showed me by opening my eyes to see and my heart to embrace biblical truth regarding homosexuality and sin, many others, it seems, are turning the other way.

Colby Martin, the author of *UnClobber*:

Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality, is one such figure today. Martin and his wife are co-pastors of Sojourn Grace Collective, a progressive Christian church in San Diego, California. Martin grew up in a Baptist household and left conservative evangelical theology because his feelings did not align with his beliefs.

SUMMARY

What is a “clobber passage” anyway? This phrase refers to six passages in the Bible which are used to support the view that homosexuality is a sin. They are called “clobber” passages because the church has used these passages to confront or “clobber” those who deny homosexuality as sin. The phrase arose in the LGBT community in the 1990s.¹ In *UnClobber*, Martin is convinced, based on his personal experience and study of Scripture, that these passages can be “un-clobbered.” In other words, the traditional interpretations of these texts are wrong, and “God does not stand opposed to those who are attracted to the same sex and he divinely blesses same-sex relationships” (xiii). In reality, they do no such thing.

Beginning with personal testimony in chapters 1–3, Martin weaves his journey from conservative evangelicalism to progressive Christianity around various chapters examining the “clobber passages.” The major impetus for Martin’s turn to progressive Christianity was his reading of *A New Kind of Christianity*,² which provided progressive interpretations of Scripture. These interpretations aligned with his emerging acceptance/feelings

regarding homosexuality. As a result, he deconstructed his faith. His book is dedicated to teasing out these progressive interpretations of Scripture.

Chapter 4 outlines Martin’s argument regarding Sodom and Gomorrah. He claims those two cities were destroyed because the people in those cities were inhospitable to Lot’s visitors, not because of the sin of homosexuality (59). According to “common sense and statistics every man in these cities could not possibly have been gay” (54). Therefore, the surrounding of Lot’s house is not a “judgment against homosexuality as an orientation or same-sex attraction, but about a display of dominance for the sake of power and control” (55–56). Martin states that the main point of this story is to reflect the opposite of the hospitality Abraham showed the Lord and his two messengers in Genesis 18 (56).

In chapter 6, Martin raises four notable points regarding Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. First, the Hebrew nouns in verse 22 are “vague and uncertain” (86–88). Second, the second half of the verses are “superfluous” (86–87). Third, there is no mention of “lesbianism” in these verses (88). And fourth, the Hebrew word *toevah* (abomination) is not “rooted in evil or immoral actions but were actions that crossed the (cultural) boundary markers set by God for Israel” (92–93). Martin is convinced that these four observations support the conclusion that these verses contain “ambiguities and uncertainties that are shaky ground. . .that God clearly prohibits homosexuality in the Old Testament” (88).

¹ Don Lattin. “Ministries Try to Turn Gays Straight.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sept 19, 1990.

² Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity* (New York, NY: Harper One, 2010).



Martin makes four important points regarding Romans 1:26–27 in chapter 8, referring to Paul’s teaching that homosexual acts are dishonorable. First, the Greek word for dishonorable refers to something “culturally shameful but not wrong or sinful” (128). Second, the word “shameless” indicates “behavior that is unseemly or indecent” (129). Third, the phrase “according to nature” refers only to a “procreative act between a man and a

woman, not the morality of the act” (131). Fourth, the statement “women having sexual relations contrary to nature” must mean “anal heterosexual sex with men which is nonprocreative” (132). Martin concludes that these verses provide “an explanation of how Jewish people saw the plight of godless pagans who... embraced idolatry...committed sexual immorality... shameful and offensive to Jewish sensibilities... against nature by being non-procreative” (132–133).

In chapter 10, Martin treats both 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. There are two assertions Martin makes about Paul’s reference to “men who practice homosexuality.” First, these verses are not about “homosexual orientation or about two men in a mutually loving committed relationship” (162). This conclusion is based on his assertion that the Leviticus passages “had no word against people born with same-sex attraction, nor a

same-sex couple in a loving committed relationship” (162). Second, Paul is condemning “exploitative (pederasty) and economic (prostitution)” same-sex acts (162). Martin supports this claim by stating Paul had no category for a person’s sexual orientation, so he could only envision “exploitative” or “economic” same-sex interactions (164). Therefore, these passages do not address or condemn mutually committed and loving relationships. Where does Martin leave us

with his personal anecdotes and biblical interpretations? He claims that, on one hand, we can affirm homosexuals and still maintain a “high view of Scripture” (165), but that, on the other hand, the Bible does not condemn “homosexuality as an orientation nor does it condemn same sex committed relationships” (171).

CRITICAL INTERACTION

Despite Martin’s attempt to “unclobber” these six passages of Scripture, there are at least three foundational problems with Martin’s interpretations. First, he rejects the Bible’s authority and interpretations of biblical passages. Instead of allowing Scripture to reshape his thinking and feelings, he allows his feelings to rule over and interpret Scripture. Second, he does not employ a biblical-theological approach to interpreting Scripture by examining the textual, epochal, and canonical horizons of the text.³ For instance, the background for Genesis 19 is Genesis 13:13 and 18:20–21. In Genesis 13:13, the term “wicked” means morally corrupt, evil in character and deed persistently.⁴ Notice this verse describes only the men in Sodom. In Genesis 19:7, when Lot addresses the men regarding their intentions towards the visitors, the term “wicked” refers to behaving in a morally corrupt way (BDB, HALOT)⁵. Also, Martin does not discuss the meaning of the Hebrew word “to know,” which is *yada*. In this context,

yada means to know sexually (BDB, HALOT)⁶. This meaning is evident when Lot offers his two daughters to these men. In Genesis 4:1, the word “knew” clearly refers to sexual relations. Judges 19:22, 25 contain the words “know” and “knew” which plainly refer to sexual relations. Obviously, these passages, combined with the background for Genesis 19 as well as Genesis 19:7 regarding the word “wicked,” refer to the sin of homosexual rape of Lot’s visitors. While Martin does examine other passages of Scripture, such as Ezekiel 16:49–50, Isaiah 1:9, Jeremiah 23:14, as well as Matthew 10:14–15 to aid in the interpretation of Genesis 19, he misinterprets them (57–60). Significantly, Martin ignores Jude 7 and 2 Peter 2:2–10, two texts which clearly and directly reveal the sexual sin of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Third, Martin does not engage with the creation narrative. Failure to include and rightly interpret Genesis 1–3 is a sure way to interpretations that result in unorthodox theological conclusions.⁷ The creation narrative provides a clear mandate for heterosexual marriage and implies that God does not affirm any other type of “loving committed relationship” meant to replace and redefine marriage. In addition, God’s mandate for sexual activity only within the covenant of marriage implies that same-sex sexual relations are contrary to the created order and therefore a sin.⁸ The creation narrative also establishes what is

according to nature and by implication what is contrary to nature. This is the basis for Paul’s argument in Romans 1:26–27. Martin also fails to consider Genesis 3, the fall and the origin of sin. Genesis 3, combined with the covenant of marriage, provides a solid foundation to understand why homosexual sexual relations of any kind are sinful. This failure is reflected in Martin’s claim that homosexuals can be Christians.

CONCLUSION

Martin’s attempts to “unclobber” these six passages fall short. He rehearses well-worn liberal interpretations of the six common passages from Scripture that are used in the homosexual debate.⁹ His theological interpretations are false because he does not use a biblical-theological approach to interpret Scripture and he does not properly consider Genesis 1–3 in his examination. Consequently, this book is a great resource to interact with to understand and refute unorthodox, liberal interpretations of the six passages of Scripture commonly used in the homosexual debate. 

³ Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 293–311.

⁴ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), s.v. “עָזָן” and Ludwig Köhler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000), s.v. “עָזָן”

⁵ Brown, Driver, Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v. “עָזָן” and Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, s.v. “עָזָן”

⁶ Brown, Driver, Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v. “יָדָה”

⁷ Stephen J. Wellum, *Systematic Theology: From Canon to Concept* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2024), 398.

⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, “A New Testament Perspective on Homosexuality,” *Themelios* 31, no. 3 (April, 2006), 62.

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⁹ For two excellent books regarding refutations of progressive interpretations of the six passages from the Bible used in the homosexual debate, please see: Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001) and James R. White and Jeffrey D. Niell. *The Same-Sex Controversy: Defending and Clarifying the Bible’s Message About Homosexuality* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2002).

Blame It on the Brain?:

A Review Essay

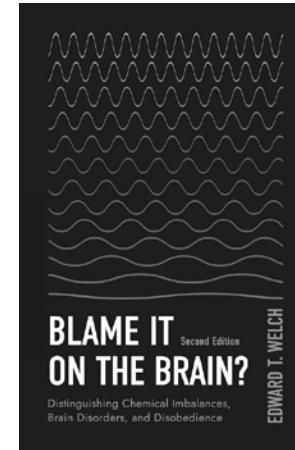
PRAISE FOR THE FIRST EDITION

I read the first edition of *Blame it on the Brain* by Ed Welch over a decade ago. I hung on every word. I found it gripping, thoughtful, and packed with relevance for ministry. I specifically remember the chapter on homosexuality and read it with anticipation. How would Welch deal with the theory that our genetic makeup determined “sexual orientation”? Welch wrote with refreshing clarity in 1998:

Homosexuality is the hot issue in the church and society. Even more than abortion, it will confront the church throughout this generation. Political sanctions will be imposed on institutions that refuse to hire homosexuals. Homosexuals will probably have their

“place at the table” with civil recognition of same-sex marriages. Under the heading of “pluralism,” all forms of sexual expression will be considered equally valid. Church leaders will continue to be “outed.” More denominations will revise their exegesis of biblical passages to allow for homosexual relationships. And people who otherwise take the Bible seriously will leave churches that call homosexuality “sin.” Certainly, throughout its history the church has faced persecution and criticism from the world, but at no time has the church so routinely been denounced as evil for upholding what appear to be biblical principles. (First edition, 152, emphasis original)

I was relieved and pleased to read such a



Edward T. Welch. *Blame It on the Brain? Distinguishing Chemical Imbalances, Brain Disorders, and Disobedience*. 2nd ed. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2024.

strong stand from Welch. He spoke with conviction as someone who prized the Bible more than the consensus of the day. Welch was a man like Issachar, who understood the times and knew what God’s people should do (1 Chr 12:32).

Welch was correct about what “the” hot issue would be in the years ahead. His prophetic voice predicted truth, but unfortunately that prophetic voice is now missing — along with the above quotation from the first edition.

A CHANGE IN ETHICS

The second edition alters the book in significant ways. There are many revisions that could be addressed, but this review will focus only on the changes related to

homosexual orientation. While there are other concerning edits, the change in ethics ranks the highest in my view.

I don’t believe Welch has changed his view on the morality of the act of homosexual intercourse (Second Edition, 150–151). A fundamental shift takes place in the second edition regarding his views of homosexual “orientation.” The change in ethics is obvious and notable.

In 1998, Welch wrote, “An artificial distinction between (sinful) homosexual practice and (justifiable) homosexual orientation contradicts the Scripture’s constant connection of desire, orientation, and deed. If the deed was prohibited in Scripture, the desire was too” (First Edition, 160). Welch was correct that to desire a sinful object is sin.

Welch could not have been clearer. He said,

The biblical position is that there is a creation order for human sexuality. God's ordained design for sexual relationships is male-female. Homosexual acts and homosexual desires, male or female, violate this creation ordinance and are thus sinful. The church must therefore warn and rebuke those who call themselves Christians but persist in homosexual practice. *And the church must actively teach that homosexual affection is sinful. It can never suggest that there is a morally neutral, constitutional, homosexual orientation.* (First Edition, 165)

Welch even believed that to simply counsel someone to contain their homosexual desires was a sin itself. He wrote, "To urge those struggling with homosexual desire simply to refrain from acting on their desire is to sin against these brothers and sisters" (First Edition, 165, emphasis mine).

Welch wanted to get at the heart of the issue in counseling, and to be a faithful counselor meant addressing homosexual orientation as sinful: "This means that our sinful orientation has innumerable expressions in our lives. With some people it is greed or jealousy, with others it is sinful anger, and with others it can be expressed in homosexual desire" (First Edition, 173).

This was a clear and biblical position. Why might Christians and biblical counselors be tempted to compromise on the ethics of homosexual orientation? Welch was concerned that the wisdom of the world could taint believers. He wrote, "Although most Christians don't condone homosexual activity, they have been affected by the homosexual agenda enough to believe that there

is some sort of homosexual orientation" (First Edition, 157).

Welch again references the homosexual agenda's power and influence when he later states,

The issue of homosexual orientation is where the church must engage the homosexual community in biblical discussion. The problem, however, is that the idea of homosexual orientation does not rest on any foundation that can be discussed. *It relies on neither biblical data nor medical research. Instead, it is a political premise for gaining homosexual rights and is rooted in personal experience.* (First Edition, 158, emphasis mine)

Not only did Welch believe there was no biblical data to support a morally neutral "orientation," but he also continued to warn about the dangers of believing in a "sinless homosexual orientation" for pastoral ministry. He wrote,

Even well-known evangelicals have been sympathetic to this idea. But we must be very careful at this point because *the consequences are profound.* For example, if you permit the idea of sinless homosexual orientation, you will encourage the church to look constantly for loopholes in the biblical data. After all, how can God hold people responsible who never choose to be homosexuals? Isn't homosexuality God's decision? (First Edition, 158, emphasis mine)

Welch was correct that a compromise on this ethic leads to "profound" consequences in the counseling room.

These quotations (and many more) have been deleted in the second edition; instead, "homosexual orientation" is no longer sinful. In 2024, Welch writes, "Yet the biblical command against covetousness does not immediately speak to attraction. If attraction is equal to lust, then the discussion is over. But I propose that attraction is not the same as lust or nonstop fantasies of a sexual event" (Second Edition, 155). This is a shift compared to the first edition in which he said to desire sin is itself sinful. He now writes,

If same-sex orientation or attraction were the same as lust, it would be sinful and treated by confession and repentance. Such a life would be complicated, however. You would need to confess constantly and would never be quite right with God, as if you were *repenting of a preference for left-handedness* or for bearing the name that your parents gave you. You would repent, and nothing would change. (Second Edition, 156, emphasis mine)

Welch no longer sees the need to repent for homosexual orientation. He is now making a distinction between same-sex lust and same-sex attraction. In fact, he goes so far as to say it is equivalent to being left-handed.

Is same-sex attraction just like writing with your left hand? God made some people to prefer being a lefty. Sinistrality is not sinful. But to compare hand dominance with the man-made concept (or "myth" as Welch used to say) of sexual orientation is, at the very least, to compare apples to oranges.

The irony is not lost on careful readers. We were once told *not* to blame homosexual orientation on the brain, but now we are

encouraged to blame the body for it. This is a significant change indeed.

PROFOUND CONSEQUENCES

This is related to a further irony which affects ministry. The counseling Welch recommends today does not focus on the heart of the matter as once recommended in 1998. It is no longer a "priority" to address the sin of same-sex orientation because it wouldn't do any good. He writes,

If perfection were a heterosexual orientation, a change in orientation would take priority. But our destiny is something more akin to friendship, as we are joined to Christ and the triune God. In that shared unity with God, we are united to all God's people, male and female. Homosexual orientation is mysterious. Clear causes are elusive. If we agree that orientation itself is not equivalent to immorality, *the focus of our pastoral care will not rest there.* (Second Edition, 158, emphasis mine)

There are more quotations to note, but perhaps one of the more telling is found in a counseling case Welch promotes about a man named John. In this story, John is married with kids and same-sex attracted. John is now viewing his wife as a roommate and wishes he had never taken his wedding vows. He is reading literature from "Gay Christians" and wants to pursue homosexuality.

Welch endorses the counselor finding the idols of the heart, but the idols are not the ones noted in the first edition. The idol of trying "to make things right through confrontation" is found, but the idol of a sexually immoral orientation is overlooked.

Instead of putting same-sex attraction to death, he writes,

John, let's bring Scripture more specifically into your same-sex attraction. Your attraction to other men is hard to understand. Its impact has affected everything in your life, but we will not discover its causes, and we don't have to. Scripture tells us there are endless mysteries around and in us, but our insights into them are not necessary for us to grow in Christ and find contentment in him. *What we know is that attractions are best contained.* Left to themselves, they can entice us, lie to us about the nature of true life, and become idols. This happens, of course, with both same-sex and heterosexual desire. Attraction can take hold of our imaginations, and our imaginations begin to demand and grasp for what will soon control us (Second Edition, 168, emphasis mine).

Is it enough to say “attractions are best contained”? It is not. Same-sex attraction must be put to death like a venomous snake. Unfortunately, Welch presents this case as an example of good counseling. Welch comments on the story,

Attraction was not his primary problem. We all say no at times to things that seem attractive to us. This is not a special case in which God gives us desires and then slaps our hands when we try to take the desired object. This is simply a matter of being human and always has been, even before the fall. We, in contrast to the subhuman creation, are called to put attractions (trees, fruit, people) *within boundaries*. Otherwise, we are ruled

by them rather than free to follow who and what is best (Second Edition, 169, emphasis mine).

By the end of the story, it is not surprising that victory is elusive. Real change has not taken place because real repentance has not transpired. Hope has been dimmed. The 1998 Welch called for repentance, but the 2024 Welch calls for containment and “boundaries.” I wish Welch would return to his first edition and reaffirm the hope found in these words:

But change is certainly possible through progressive sanctification. “Such were some of you” (1 Cor. 6:11) is the crucial reminder that there is *hope to vanquish both homosexual acts and homosexual desire*. How does this happen? The way of change is familiar. You need no special techniques. It consists of simultaneously juggling two themes: the knowledge of ourselves and the knowledge of God (First Edition, 173, emphasis mine).

Same-sex desire can be “vanquished.”

In the 90s, it was refreshing to hear him write about the “myth” that he exposed. He said, “The flesh does not want to see sin in all its ugliness; it works to keep it covered. What clouds sin even more is *the myth that there is, by God's design, a homosexual orientation*. These two factors work violently against the truth about ourselves” (First Edition, 175, emphasis mine).

Welch was even clear about the role of Satan in homosexual orientation. He said,

It is too easy to settle for the absence of homosexual behavior and not wor-

ry about attitudes. Remember that it is *on the question of homosexual orientation that the world, the flesh, and the Devil converge.... And the Devil stands behind both*, whispering his murderous deceptions. *The deception of homosexual orientation must be exposed and corrected. It is a false teaching that will eventually lead to bad fruit.* We truly do have an “orientation,” but it is a spiritual orientation that is against God. It is not a simple physical propensity (First Edition, 175–176, emphasis mine).

Indeed, it is a “false teaching” that leads to bad fruit, and it is sad that Welch has now embraced it. It does not bring me joy to agree with his original words that he “must be exposed and corrected.” Welch has become the very minister he warned us about years ago.

SOFTENING THE SCRIPTURES

Much has happened in the culture since the first edition. In 2015, Obergefell altered the political landscape so that, by 2024, the White House declared Easter Sunday to be the Transgender Day of Visibility. A lot can happen in a decade during a sexual revolution, but the Word of the Lord never changes (Isa 40:8; 1 Pet 1:24–25). It is with sadness that we must realize we no longer have a Welch from Issachar.

The need of the hour is not to lessen our convictions, but to stand strong upon them. We need a robust commitment to the sufficiency of Scripture that speaks the truth in love. What made *Blame it on the Brain* a wonderful book was its insight from the Bible and its ability to shine hope into a confused culture. The second edition has

lost that power. It was once a bright light-house; now it is a flickering flashlight that causes confusion.

The lesson I learned from the first edition is that I cannot blame my body for sinful deeds and desires. The takeaway from the second edition is that anyone can be susceptible to a “false teaching.” We should take heed lest we fall. When the next decade rolls by, will our convictions be stronger, or will they be weaker? Will we be more committed to the Bible or less?

May we all take heed of the exhortation from Welch in 1998. It is the way he concluded his original chapter on homosexuality: “Be alert, however, to the distinction that some make between homosexual desire and homosexual activity. This is an area where we may have been influenced by the interpretations of the brain research, while Scripture shines a much brighter, clearer light” (First Edition, 181). 

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Seeking Truth and Speaking Truth: Law and Morality in Our Cultural Moment

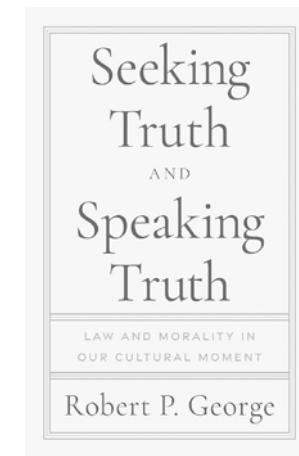
INTRODUCTION

Gone is the “Age of Faith.” Gone is the “Age of Reason.” Now is the “Age of Feelings.” Individuals are convinced that truth must comport itself with their feelings, feelings that cannot possibly be incorrect (xii). This is where Robert P. George, the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University, begins his discussion of a wide range of topics in *Seeking Truth and Speaking Truth: Law and Morality in Our Cultural Moment*. He continues by describing our cultural milieu as, “the spectacle of people embracing a fierce moral absolutism based on beliefs that are the products of nothing more

than subjective feelings” (xii). As a pastor, legislator, public theology practitioner, and conservative public policy advocate, I echo Professor George’s description and appreciate his starting point. From Sunday School discussions to legislative floor debates, from social media posts to water-cooler conversations, what is most often revered as authoritative is what is “*felt*.” Today’s consequential issues, and the debates surrounding them, are assumed to be most often won by skilled emotive tacticians, unless George has his way.

SUMMARY

The proposition put forth in the book’s preface can be substantiated by countless examples. We can observe the pub-



Robert P. George. *Seeking Truth and Speaking Truth: Law and Morality in Our Cultural Moment*. New York, NY: Encounter Books, 2025.

lic expectation that personal feelings are off-limits during a critique, the emotional manipulation by PR and marketing firms, and the use of heart-wrenching stories by political consultants to sway constituents. Furthermore, the general public often attempts to avoid direct accountability for thoughts on difficult questions through emotional language. The typical approach is to lead with emotional appeals, with thoughtful content — if it is ever presented at all — coming much later. Within this context, how does George address critical questions? He does not pander to this prevailing appetite. Instead, he arms his readers with logically sound, well-articulated, and thought-provoking arguments founded upon natural law.

In his latest work, George guides his

readers through challenging terrain in twenty-three chapters, organized into four parts, presenting material from essays, legal briefs, and other writings from George’s lengthy career as a scholar and public intellectual. George navigates issues like equal protection and the unborn, human dignity, marriage, economics, education, and medical ethics, among others. In each, he brings a well-reasoned explanation of natural law’s influence and conclusion. By highlighting the importance of basic human goods (what he identifies as the foundations of natural law) and their necessity to human flourishing, George provides us with discerning analysis and compelling positions.

This resource is not for the casual, un-disciplined reader. George requires your

Reading George's work demands much, but rewards the attentive reader with muscular responses to today's most controversial issues

attention to the details of his developing arguments. He constructs well-reasoned, well-defended, logical arguments that provide structure for his conclusions. One can see how his legal mind asks questions, exposes problematic assumptions, and provides substantiated rebuttals. In his chapter addressing campus illiberalism, for example, George identifies the “core of the problem” to be “...institutions...subverting the transmission of knowledge by failing to ensure that their students...have the opportunity to consider, the best that is to be said on competing sides of all questions that are in dispute among reasonable people of goodwill” (262). He provides support for this claim (261–262), identifies its scandalous effect (263), describes the challenging nature of getting it “right” (263–265), and then offers needed steps to rectify the problem (266–272). For a more demanding, yet fruitful, example, one will benefit from the sixty-seven page argument addressing equal protection and the unborn (129–

196). Reading George's work demands much, but rewards the attentive reader with muscular responses to today's most controversial issues.

Beyond offering responses to controversial issues, George's work provides an additional benefit. I have witnessed, on countless occasions in both ministry and legislative contexts, instances where well-meaning people struggled to articulate, let alone ground, their understanding of fundamental questions. Questions regarding life, virtue, justice, marriage, family, sex, identity, etc., all demand more than half-baked feelings. The pages of George's book, like so many of his prior works, bring the value of natural law into focus. Natural law, natural rights, and basic human goods, finding their source in God's creation order, provide structure and animation to our understanding of these critical matters. To the extent that we are ignorant of these concepts, we will struggle to offer sound arguments

consistent with the reality in which God has placed us. George works to expose his readers to the animating influence of these concepts.¹

CRITICAL INTERACTION

There are weaknesses in *Seeking Truth and Speaking Truth*. First, George stops short of grounding human dignity in the *Imago Dei*. In his first chapter, addressing fundamental aspects of human dignity, George states, “We argue that all human beings... have equal fundamental dignity” (3). Why? “In truth, all human beings have real dignity simply because they are persons — entities with natural capacities for thought and free choice” (5). George further argues, “... having a rational nature is the ground of full moral worth” (19); and, “...they have a rational nature...In virtue of having such a nature, all human beings are persons; and all persons possess profound, inherent, and equal dignity. Thus, every human being deserves full moral respect” (23). George would do well to take the next step by identifying the ultimate ground for human dignity and value: the *Imago Dei*.

Second, George ignores the God-ordained role of the church. In his chapter entitled, “Markets, Morality, and Civil Society,” he identifies “three crucial pillars” that “Any healthy society, and decent society, will rest upon” (252–254). The theologian would assume that George is about to address the three God-ordained spheres of authority for the good of society: the family, the church, and the state. No. George identifies the person, the family, and government.

He then adds two additional pillars: universities and businesses (255). These five spheres, according to George, are what a healthy society rests upon. The church does not make his list. He concludes this chapter by stating, “The two greatest institutions ever devised for lifting people out of poverty and enabling them to live in dignity are the properly regulated market economy and the institution of marriage” (260). These two institutions are indeed a blessing, but the church's role is indispensable. To be charitable, the weaknesses identified above are not errors in the content provided. The weaknesses stem from what is left unsaid.

Overall, the work of Robert P. George in *Seeking Truth and Speaking Truth* is commendable. This book is thoughtful, well organized, and fearless. Readers unfamiliar with natural law will gain a newfound confidence in defending a conservative, Christian worldview. Readers already familiar with these principles will appreciate the depth of George's arguments. George should also be commended for demonstrating how one can send those skilled emotive tacticians on their merry way. 

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¹ See also: Robert P. George, *Making Men Moral: Civil Liberties and Public Morality* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993); Robert P. George, *In Defense of Natural Law* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999); Robert P. George, *Conscience and Its Enemies: Confronting the Dogmas of Liberal Secularism* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2013); and, Robert P. George and Cornel West, *Truth Matters: A Dialogue on Fruitful Disagreement in an Age of Division* (New York, NY: Post Hill Press, 2025).

Family Unfriendly:

A Critical Examination of Overparenting and Its Consequences

I'll get straight to the point. If you're a pastor, you should read *Family Unfriendly: How Our Culture Makes Raising Kids Much Harder Than It Needs to Be*. Actually, if you're not a pastor, you should still read this book. Everyone should read this book. In fact, in the time it took me to read this book, both my wife and sister-in-law started — and finished — *Family Unfriendly* on my recommendation and repeatedly told me to hurry up and finish so that I could write this review.

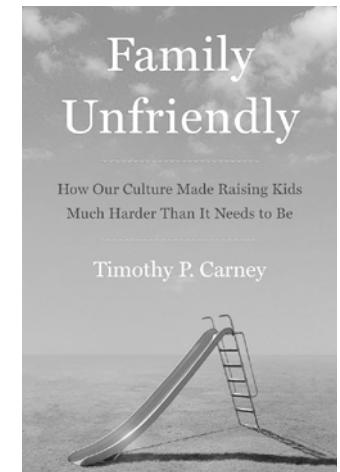
Timothy P. Carney, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, unfolds the story of how American culture has become increasingly hostile to kids and families. Across 14 chapters, Carney works *a posteriori* from the small, seemingly mundane (have lower ambitions for your kids) to the much greater, civilizational impact of our fertility crisis (many humans believe we are evil). In the final analysis, Carney pinpoints things that parents often

feel, but have a difficult time articulating. For instance, why do parents feel the anxiety to get their kids in sports camps at such a young age when the likelihood of them making it pro is minuscule? Or why is it that, even though dads are much more involved today than in previous generations, it feels like *both* parents work more now than they did in previous generations?

Grasping at these things feels like tilting at “vibes,” when in reality the state of play for families today versus previous generations is notably more difficult in some ways, even though technology and innovation has made other parts much easier. It’s why it can be amazing on the one hand to have highly technical baby monitors previous generations would marvel at, and it feels easier to find a dog park that serves boutique cocktails than a restaurant that can feed a family of six without taking out a payday loan.

For Carney, a family unfriendly culture is not one part of the culture, but touches on every aspect: parenting is harder than it used to be, and virtually every institution in modern life — from the unreal expectations of travel sports to the effect of modern technology on family formation — militates against the family. As I like to say to my friends who have numerous kids like us, *it's hard out here*.

The book is occasionally humorous about the realities of family life, and Carney’s writing style is inviting. Additionally, he sprinkles in wonky social science research to help make some very interesting points that seem counter-intuitive (parenting more kids is actually easier than fewer kids); while many of us can see other such social-science findings with our own eyes (tech has made building relationships miserable for Gen Z). For these, and many other interesting facts, I encourage the



Timothy P. Carney. *Family Unfriendly: A Critical Examination of Overparenting and Its Consequences*. New York, NY: Harper, 2024.

reader to Carney's book itself. There's not enough space in this review to chronicle all of his excellent research.

BUILDING A FAMILY FRIENDLY CULTURE

Instead, for the sake of this review, I'd like to consider some ways that Carney's book should encourage pastors and church members to build a family friendly church culture.

I am a father of four and a pastor of a church that has 171 members — with more than 100 children under the age of eighteen. Since our founding less than three years ago, we've had more than thirty pregnancies. The meal trains and wedding showers — and then baby showers — are endless. After church on Sundays, kids run to-and-fro, inside and out, as one kid might bring a football and an impromptu football game begins; while a separate pack of girls explores the grounds where our church meets. There are kids everywhere. We are a fertile

people. But not only are we a fertile people — we are a joyful people.

While policy wonks can argue about the best means to promote a family friendly American culture, pastors and their members should aim to cultivate a family friendly church culture. I think this means at least three things: formation, instruction, and example.

Formation

A family friendly church culture will seek to form its people through its life together. This includes the preaching of the gospel that addresses parents and children (Eph 6), and the responsibilities of members to help care for those children under their care. In this sense, I have a responsibility not only to my own kids, but to the kids of Jared and Sam, and Blake and Jen, and Ben and Anna, and Trey and Hayley. Forming a family friendly church culture will mean understanding the bonds of love that are shared between members.

This is why Carney's chapter, "Why You Should Quit Your Job," is so powerful. In the chapter, Carney relates how the "unpaid labor" of mothers makes the world go round. He speaks of his own wife and how she cares for their six children, while also doing good to their neighborhood and church community. I could say the same. The mission of the church to care for those in need, do spiritual good to the weak, and faithfully evangelize our young children is powered by moms who have elected a life of sacrifice for the sake of others. In this way, they carry on the tradition of the great women in Scripture like Hannah, Lydia, and Mary who sacrificed much for the good of others. Through their good works, they help to form other aspiring young moms in the way they should go.

This culture is the place where men and women are formed to love Christ, lay their lives down for others, rejoice in happiness, and bear one another's burdens with tenderness and sympathy. In short, it's a

culture of virtue formation for men and women who are to grow up into Christ in every way.

Instruction

Additionally, it also means helping instruct young men and women who aspire to marriage, as they do so in a world that has commodified sex. It also means instructing the young parents who are continuously being discipled by the world into a false image of a pristine, white-washed, Instagram-ready version of parenthood — one that doesn't exist and instead creates bondage.

The data on the effects of the smartphone, especially on Gen Z, continues to be disheartening. Carney's chapters "Posthuman" and "The Mystery of the Sex Recession" chronicle what a dystopian, depressing reality many of our young people are living through. While smartphones have increased efficiency and remain a great gift to humanity in many ways, the effects on relationships, and especially relationship



formation among young adults, is largely negative. Dating apps teach young people to view others in largely the same way they might view an Uber Eats menu. And while there are many wonderful stories of young Christian couples meeting on dating apps, I've found that dating apps can often be a hindrance for young people for whom the sea is ever expanding. With so many "fish" to swipe, so to speak, how can you be sure that a given particular fish, with all of her flaws, is the "one"?

Pastors need to shepherd their people in cultivating godly character in themselves, while also looking for similar virtues in potential mates. Young members need help discerning godly character in future spouses, looking for the hidden person of the heart, and not external adorning (1 Pet 3:4). Young people need to see marriage as a means toward greater Christlikeness, counting others' needs greater than their own, doing nothing from selfish ambition or conceit (Phil 2:3).

Likewise, young parents need examples of other families who are loving and leading their children, disciplining them in the fear of the Lord (Prov 9:9–10). There are many voices on social media that tempt parents — especially mothers — to despair through a sanitized portrayal of what parenting requires. These parents need to be cared for in the midst of the various trials that accompany each stage of childrearing. Like an experienced physician who is able to see a patient and know by virtue of their experience that all is well, so experienced mothers and fathers can help calm parental anxieties where they exist.

Example

Healthy churches produce healthy

families as younger members enter into marriage and parenting with exemplars of the Christian life around them. Paul's commendation for older men and women in Titus 2 presumes that the church dignifies social relations with older men being "sober minded, self-controlled, sound in faith" and the women being "reverent in behavior . . . self-controlled, pure, submissive to their husbands." Orderly homes that are oriented to the cultivation of Christian virtue testify to a loving Savior who laid down his life for his bride whom he purchased with his own blood. In their own way, orderly homes help shape the moral imaginations of the cultural refugees who walk through our doors on Sunday morning.

Further, at our church and many others like it, there is a clause in our church covenant that includes the commitment, "to endeavor to bring up such as may at any time be under our care, in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and by a pure and loving example to seek the salvation of our family and friends." This means that I owe it to my fellow members to help them think about how to cultivate a godly home. To build a family friendly culture, we must start with a family friendly *church culture* that promotes godly child rearing, and faithful husbands and wives who love and respect one another.

Conclusion

In recent days, we've heard much about a so-called "vibe shift" in the culture, especially since the passing of the conservative Christian activist Charlie Kirk — a man who spent much of his time praising the virtues of family formation, especially for discontented young Gen Z men and women. If the vibe shift means more young people reconfiguring their

Yes, let's build a family friendly culture in the workplace, government, and in public policy. But let's also keep the main thing — the family of God — the main thing.

understanding of the good life away from fruitless pursuits of maximal pleasure and toward a life of sacrifice, we all should greet this with much expectation. I am hopeful that such a thing is indeed happening.

What I find interesting, however, is how integral Kirk's Christian faith was to his vision of the good life. Yes, family formation is a natural good that is pursued often irrespective of one's own confessional (or non-confessional) tradition. It is a good end in itself. Yet, one of the ends of family formation is that it points beyond itself toward something eschatological. "This mystery is profound," Paul tells us, "and I am telling you that it relates to Christ and the church" (Eph 5:32). Through the self-giving love of husband and wife, and the de-centering of oneself through welcoming children into the world, men and women begin to see that the "stuff" of life is so much bigger than them. The material, earthy matters of providing and keeping a home are caught up in the transcendent, where Christ is.

Building a family-friendly culture, in general, must start in the household of God. Churches are to be the soil in which young men and women learn the sacrifice required to be good husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. And if this family

friendly culture is to have any stability, if it's more than a mere "vibe shift," then there must be revival in our churches. And revival, as we know, cannot be produced, it can only be prayed for. While we wait on the Lord, we must devote ourselves, again, to the means he has given to his church: preaching, prayer, and the sacraments.

Thus it is that our normal, boring churches can do things that shame the wisdom of this world. As we devote ourselves to the Lord's means — doing the Lord's work in the Lord's way — and as churches disciple their members to think rightly about themselves in the light of the cross, no matter their vocation, we just might see flickers of light in the ashes of our barren culture. Yes, let's build a family friendly culture in the workplace, government, and in public policy. But let's also keep the main thing — the family of God — the main thing. If pastors want to build the kind of culture that Tim Carney exalts, they should start with their own pulpits. 

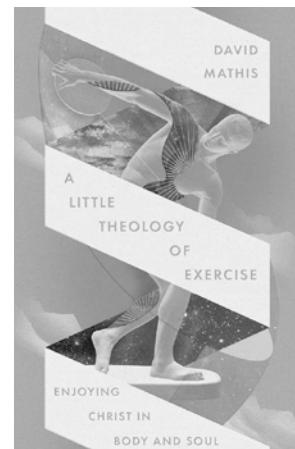
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A Little Theology of Exercise: Enjoying Christ in Body and Soul

As the director of discipleship for GRIT Ministries, which is dedicated to glorifying God through equipping, encouraging, supporting, and challenging athletic coaches to live for Christ, I was eager to read *A Little Theology of Exercise: Enjoying Christ in Body and Soul* by David Mathis. In this book, Mathis asks readers to consider a practical, yet often neglected question in the realm of Christian formation: How can God's gift of physical exercise be experienced in such a way that we profit from it spiritually? Or more to the point, "How does the joy of exercise serve joy in God?" (14). In what follows, I offer a summary of his work, a brief analysis, and three ways to fruitfully put it to use in daily life.

SUMMARY

Mathis breaks this book into two parts.



David Mathis. *A Little Theology of Exercise: Enjoying Christ in Body and Soul*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025.

Part one addresses how we ought to think about exercise as Christians. Mathis begins by asking, "How do God's word and prayer, 'make holy' various bodily acts for which God designed and made us?" (17). Chapter one is the most important and longest chapter in the book. Here Mathis provides a simple, but helpful biblical theology of the human body via a six act story: (1) God made our bodies; (2) sin has seized our bodies; (3) God himself took a human body; (4) God himself dwells in our bodies; (5) we glorify God now in our bodies; (6) we await a spectacular bodily upgrade (21–36). From creation to new

creation, Mathis takes readers on a sprint across the biblical canon for the purpose of showing how these divinely designed and revealed truths about our bodies are to inform the Christian life, particularly our movement and exercise. In chapter two, he turns to how a biblically informed view of the body can aid our prayer lives, specifically in the area of thanksgiving or gratitude (39–41) and asking for help or intercession (41–43).

With the theological foundation laid in part one, in part two, Mathis begins to address why Christians exercise. He presents



five motivating factors in chapters 3–7 to help readers understand how to “make physical exercise serve spiritual joy in God” (48). The first motivation, presented in chapter three, urges us to first and foremost exercise to glorify God in our bodies (51–56). I found chapters four and five, motivations two and three, the most insightful and interesting. In chapter four, Mathis uses both Scripture and scientific research to show how physical exertion builds and conditions the brain, causing us to have greater mental clarity and stamina. In chapter five he addresses how exercise builds resilience and resistance to laziness and apathy in all areas of life through conditioning the will. Motivation four, chapter six, is all about joy, which will be no surprise for those familiar with Mathis and his mentor John Piper, for *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him*. Finally, motivation five, chapter seven, covers how exercise enables us to better love and serve others with the body God has given us.

ANALYSIS

If you are looking for a “how to” book on exercise and healthy eating habits, you will be disappointed with this work. If, however, you desire a deeper understanding of the gift and purpose of movement and bodily existence for the Christian life, your soul will benefit much from reading *A Little Theology of Exercise*. In this short book, readers will find an evangelical, orthodox treatment of the human body that is faithful to Scripture and filled with practical takeaways that are explicitly and uniquely Christian. There are only three things I would have liked to see developed further: (1) idolatry present in fitness culture; (2) pointing readers to some good Christian

resources on things not covered in the book (especially exercise, body, and nutrition related); and (3) more on disability.

Regarding idolatry in fitness culture, Mathis certainly makes mention of this reality throughout the book, and it is implicitly countered by focusing on righteous motivations for exercise. I do appreciate the positive and constructive focus of the book. No doubt, more Christians probably struggle with sloth in a sedentary culture than making health and fitness a counterfeit god. Yet I would have liked to see the other end of the spectrum receive a little more attention, such as a brief chapter of its own perhaps.

No book can do all things, and we should not want them to! I appreciate this book’s laser focus on proper motivations of Christian exercise and the gift of movement. So when I say I think providing something like a short appendix or bibliography for readers regarding some areas not covered in the book, it is not a critique of the work. I do not expect to read a book by a pastor and get nutrition advice. However, I think readers would find a curated “sources for further study” a helpful addition.

It was wonderful to see Mathis explicitly address those living with disabilities with compassion and encouragement (26–27); I simply wanted to hear him keep going! I think more on the topic and how to adapt the content and argument of the book to these brothers and sisters would be helpful.

APPLICATION

How can we put this book to work?:

An approachable book for group study:

This book would be a fruitful study for a seasonal men’s or women’s Bible study group, a pastor’s group, or for coaches and athletes. This is especially true of part two which covers the five motivations for Christian exercise.

More focused prayers: This book will help readers understand why we exist as embodied creatures designed for movement, and how that should change the way we pray for God to meet our needs and empower us for service.

A proper view of being physically fit: As Mathis argues well, such things as living longer and looking better are side effects, not the main event or motivation for Christian exercise. Christians exercise for such things as mental clarity to understand the Word of God better, to help them be less anxious and more gentle and patient with others. Christians exercise to build greater discipline, resilience, and fortitude in all areas of life. Christians exercise to have bodies that are able to help those in need when duty calls. Christians exercise because a fit body serves greater spiritual joy in Christ.

CONCLUSION

In asking us to consider how moderate, intentional, and routine physical exertion helps us enjoy Christ more and better serve others, Mathis invites us to experience the spiritual boost exercise can offer our souls. I highly commend this needed book to you on Christ-centered exercise. 

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The Body God Gives: A Biblical Response to Transgender Theory

The rapid pace with which the transgender movement has risen to the mainstream of culture has shocked many Christians and conservatives. How did we move so quickly from the policy of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” in the mid-90s under Bill Clinton to Richard Levine (now going by the name, “Rachel Levine”) serving as the first transgender four-star Assistant Secretary of Health under Joe Biden? This is a major cultural shift in a relatively short time — just a single generation. Some of the shift can be attributed to the influence of social media and, through it, peer contagion, as docu-

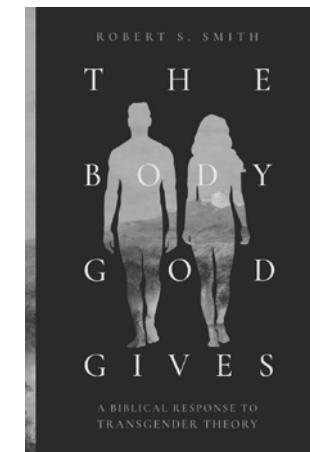
mented in Abigail Shrier’s book, *Irreversible Damage*. But the roots of transgender theory are much deeper than recent history, and the intellectuals undergirding it often make no more sense in their writings than the average transgender advocate on the street.

Robert S. Smith’s most recent book, *The Body God Gives*, helps readers to navigate this admittedly confusing movement from a biblical worldview. His stated aim is specifically to “evaluate the central ontological claim of transgender theory: that the sexed body does

not determine the gendered self” (3). In evaluating this claim, Smith explains the philosophical foundations of transgender theory. He traces its connection to postmodernism, feminism, and queer theory, and demonstrates that the disjunction between the body and gender identity which is assumed as fact among transgender theorists and its modern advocates is a relatively novel idea, grounded in nothing substantial, and is more imaginary than real. Indeed, among some transgender theorists, language itself is imbued with a quasi-mystical power that can determine not only gender identity, but even sex.

Judith Butler, for example, argues that gender is “constructed and constituted by language,” and is thus “performative” (139). Furthermore, the “gendered body” is likewise something that has “no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (139). Smith avers in response that for Butler, language “verges on the supernatural, effectively granting God-like, body-forming powers to human words” (139). In mystical and charismatic Christian circles, some teach that Christians can “speak things into existence.” Butler, and those adopting her theory, have essentially adopted a secularized version of this and applied it to sex and gender. What a person says they are — *that* they are.

Smith’s evaluation of transgender theory unfolds in three parts. Part I (chapters 1–3) describes the dramatic shift, or “transgender tipping point,” that has elevated transgender theory and practice into mainstream thinking in the West, followed by a summary of various evangelical responses to it, as well as Smith’s



Robert S. Smith. *The Body God Gives: A Biblical Response to Transgender Theory*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2025.

own method of evaluation. His method is decidedly evangelical, and specifically Reformed, relying on the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* to ground his evaluation in divine revelation. He argues for the use of grammatico-historical exegesis, biblical and systematic theology, and will at times employ the contours of Covenant Theology (specifically, the covenants of redemption and grace) in his critiques. He draws on the writings of reformed writers like Calvin, Hodge, Vos, and more, and stands in firm agreement with the Nashville Statement (22). But this method does not prevent him from engaging transgender theory on its own philosophical ground, which is largely what Part II of the book is about.

Part II (chapters 4–6) provides a philosophical and historical analysis of the various feminist and queer theories that have given rise to the present transgender moment, noting especially how these theories distinguished sex from gender, and then used these distinctions to advance their arguments. Smith suggests that, although the distinction between sex and gender is relatively recent, originating primarily from feminist scholars in the mid-twentieth century, it need not be jettisoned outright because of its checkered past. One can recognize that sex is a biological fact while gender is a culturally expressed effect. But importantly, Smith argues, “for the distinction between sex and gender to remain meaningful and useful, it is necessary to anchor gender in sex” (155). Indeed, this very point cuts right at the heart of transgender theory which claims that the sexed body neither signifies nor determines the gendered self (157). This claim leads trans theorists into all man-

ners of insuperable contradictions (e.g., the idea that there is a psychological essence to gender that has traits of the sexed body while that very essence can end up in the wrong body). Smith helpfully surveys the most significant scholars who have shaped and developed transgender theory and demonstrates by logical argument how their various claims collapse under scrutiny.

Finally, Part III (chapters 7–12) offers an evangelical response to transgender theory by expounding on the creation account of Genesis 1–3, highlighting what these early chapters of the Bible say about the body, human sexuality, and what it means to be made male and female. In conversation with trans-affirming scholars, Smith contends that the creation account firmly establishes a binary model of male and female sex, and that it leaves no room for a spectrum of genders. Moreover, the creation account envisions a “synthetic integration” between the body and soul that “necessarily excludes the possibility of an ontological mismatch between the (visible) body and the (invisible) soul,” thus excluding the possibility of a transgender identity (222). Smith further contends that the eschatological trajectory of Scripture, culminating as it does with the resurrection of the body, implies that a person’s biological sex is central to their personal identity (364). Since, therefore, the protological ground of sex is the same as its eschatological ground, the implication is that any form of gender incongruence should be recognized as a matter of epistemological misidentification, not ontological misalignment (366). Put differently, a person whose gender identity is not anchored in their

biological sex should recognize this as a distortion of reality and should aim to bring their gender in line with their sex.

As I stated above, much of the scholarship among queer and trans theorists is often muddled and confusing to read. Martha Nussbaum, for example, criticizes Judith Butler’s work on the grounds that her excessive verbosity and opacity “causes the reader to expend so much effort in deciphering her prose that little energy is left for assessing the truth of the claims” (133). Part of the confusion in the prose is likely due, at least in part, to the postmodern deconstruction of language and reality which is at the foundation of trans theory. Smith has done the hard work of making sense of the scholarship, fairly presenting it, and critiquing it on both philosophical and theological grounds. To understand the transgender moment we live in, culturally, and the ideas that have shaped it, and to respond with a biblical answer and a better vision for human sexuality, *The Body God Gives* is likely the best single-volume resource to have in your library. 

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*Know that the LORD
Himself is God;
It is He who has made
us, and not we ourselves;
We are His people and the
sheep of His pasture.*

PSALM 100:3, NASB



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