eikon

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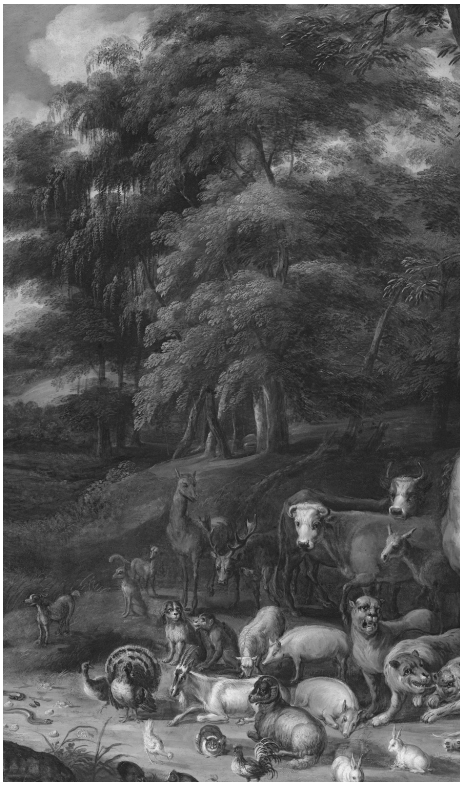
Issue 1

JONATHAN E. SWAN

Editorial: A New Evangelical Religion



CBMW has existed for nearly forty years, contending from its inception that a proper understanding of the "complementary differences between men and women . . . are essential for obedience to Scripture and for the health of the family and the church."[1] We believed it then, and we believe it now.

The careful observer has noticed that the discussions and debates on these issues have taken a variety of forms over the years.[2] And yet, despite the transformation that has happened in our society and in our churches — much of which was anticipated and predicted by complementarians — there are still some evangelicals who continue to believe that such issues aren't as important as the Scriptures suggest.

Since the Danvers Statement was first composed in 1987, the feminist flattening of the sexes turned steadily towards the flattening of human sexuality in the acceptance of homosexuality. And once this sexual leveling had taken its course in the creation of so-called "Gay Marriage" via judicial fiat, the sexual revolution launched even more quickly into the transgender mania of which we are now beginning to see the fallout.

No matter how much of the created order was suppressed, no matter how many of God's divinely established institutions were redefined, no matter how many of our embodied realities were denied and reinterpreted, some evangelicals remain resistant to the idea that these truths really matter.

[1] See CBMW's Mission statement: https://cbmw.org/about/vision-mission/.

[2] See a very fine and brief history of those here: Claire Smith, "A History of Complementarianism," *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 7.2 (Fall 2025): 86–106.

For instance, in a clip posted earlier this year, hosts of the *Holy Post Podcast* ridiculed those concerned about truths extending beyond the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed as "American evangelical fundamentalist MAGA world," who "want to know where you are on your politics and social issues . . . because they've lifted those up to credal importance." According to these influencers, we shouldn't draw dividing lines between "Christians" and "heretics," for instance, on the issue of gay marriage. Like the doctrine of baptism, Christians of good will should be able to agree to disagree on what biblically constitutes marriage.

In a podcast devoted in part to celebrating last year's 1700-year anniversary of the Council of Nicaea (325), such statements reveal an historical naivete. Historically speaking, Protestants have never considered the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed to be the sole confessional grounds of Christian Orthodoxy. Had this been the case, my shelves would contain far fewer volumes of Protestant confessions. And unless one believes Protestants and Roman Catholics confess *the same gospel*, then we would have to consider these confessions superfluous, "MAGA world" stuff.

Furthermore, creeds and confessions have always arisen in the context of doctrinal debate and controversy and are written to provide a faithful summary of the biblical teaching on the issue at stake. In the fourth century, the divinity of the Son and Spirit were in question; in the fifth, the Son's two-natures as God and man required clarification. In the Reformation, the doctrine of Scripture, salvation, the church, and the Lord's Supper all received confessional attention. In more recent history, evangelicals composed the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978) to stake out a biblical position on the veracity of Scripture.

The point of this brief historical excursion? Christians did not stop confessing — even confessing first order issues — in the fourth century. And until Christ returns, Christians will need to confront issues facing the gospel with faithful, confessional clarity. While building on scriptural foundations as expressed in the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and others, history tells us that further clarifying statements will be necessary.[3]

This need for confessional faithfulness explains why CBMW was established so many years ago, beginning with the Danvers Statement (1987) in response to evangelical feminism, then renewing our efforts thirty years later with the Nashville Statement (2017) in response to homosexuality, same-sex attraction, and transgenderism.

Aside from this misunderstanding of creeds and confessions, the more concerning elements of the above-mentioned podcast discussion concern their theological evaluation of moral issues. While rightly recognizing the practical importance of questions related to female ordination, gay marriage, and gender identity, they fail to distinguish between first- and second-order issues. Instead, they lump all these ethical questions together as "non-essential doctrines" about which sincere "sisters and brothers in the faith" can disagree.

But it was to provide a biblical corrective to such notions that the Nashville Statement was written, as Article 10 states:

We affirm that it is sinful to approve of homosexual immorality or transgenderism and that such approval constitutes an

[3] See Matthew Y. Emerson and Brandon D. Smith's clarifying essay on this point: Matthew Y. Emerson and Brandon D. Smith, "Is Nicaea Enough?: On Moral Revisionism and Appeals to the Creeds" *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 7.1 (Spring 2025): 100–105.

essential departure from Christian faithfulness and witness.

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

On these matters of Christian orthodoxy, *The Holy Post* regrettably represents a segment within evangelicalism that desires a go-along-to-get-along relationship with the spirit of the age. In a previous era, Francis Schaeffer, writing in *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (1984), referred to this *modus operadi* as "accommodation." In Schaeffer's assessment, "the evangelical world most often has said nothing; or worse has said nothing different from what the world would say."[4] Is not the tolerance of same-sex marriage and transgender identity in the household of God evidence of such accommodation? And such accommodation, Schaeffer argued, "is nothing less than the most gross form of worldliness in the proper definition of that word."[5]

Now more than forty years after Schaeffer wrote his stinging indictment on evangelicalism, American and Western culture has grown more secular and hostile to Christianity — the recent vibe shift notwithstanding. More major Christian denominations are approving of the LGBT revolution than have held their ground. And those church bodies that have not formally bowed to the New Morality are nevertheless beginning to inch closer to compromise. Recent examples include the Anglican Church, whose first female Archbishop Sarah Mullaly played an integral role in promoting liturgical blessings for same-sex couples.

Similarly, Pope Francis carved out an "innovative contribution *to the pastoral meaning of blessings*," so that Roman Catholic clergy can provide blessings to "couples in irregular situations and same-sex couples." While we are told Pope Francis's "innovative" pastoral recommendations can be carried out "without officially validating [same-sex couples'] status or changing in any way the Church's perennial teaching on marriage,"

[4] Francis Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer: Volume Four: A Christian View of the Church*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1985), 4: 320.
[5] Schaeffer, *The Complete Works*, 4:321.

those of us who doubt the practical possibility of the late pontificate's design plead for forgiveness.[6]

A more recent commentary on the American church can help us to explain in part what is behind the evangelical demise on moral issues. According to John West,

Most Christians in America grow up in cultural captivity. They are immersed in a culture hostile to genuine Christianity at home, school, college, and the workplace. This is especially true of those who go on to be pastors, professors, ministry leaders, journalists, politicians, or to work in the entertainment industry. After they have been immersed for years in an elite culture that rejects orthodox Christianity, they can easily start identifying more with those who hate Christianity than those who embrace it. They become Stockholm Syndrome Christians.[7]

Although West focuses his comments here in America, there is no doubt they apply to the West more broadly. We contend that recent accommodations to the spirit of the age in the Christian sexual ethic have more to do with a desire to make Christianity more attractive to its "cultured despisers" than it does the discovery of new insight into the biblical text.[8] If it were otherwise, why are all such recent updates to the church's sexual ethic exclusively following the dictates of the sexual revolution?

This "cultural captivity," along with the desire to make Christianity more respectable in the eyes of the world, merely presents a reprise of theological liberalism. For this was the project of German liberal Friedrich Schleiermacher, who sought to rescue Christianity from the outmoded, passé form he inherited. In other words, what we might simply refer to as "woke Christianity," in all of its varieties, is a repetition of the liberal project in a different key.[9]

Ultimately, however, such endeavors result in creating a new religion. As J. Gresham Machen so powerfully warned just over one hundred years ago, "In trying to remove from Christianity everything that could possibly be objected to in the name of science, in trying to bribe off the enemy by those concessions which the enemy most desires, the apologist has really abandoned what he started out to defend."[10]

If Professor Machen were alive today, he would have to update his manuscript slightly to read, "In trying to remove from Christianity everything that could possibly be objected to in the name of *diversity, equity, and inclusion*," although his point would remain the same.

Faithfulness in our day demands that we draw clear biblical lines, regardless of whether those lines are drawn in the area of theology proper or anthropology. A Christianity that does not recognize the difference between man and woman, that redefines marriage, that reinterprets the Bible's sexual ethic is not Christianity at all, but something else entirely.

Jonathan E. Swan is Executive Editor of Eikon

[6] https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20231218_fiducia-supplicans_en.html
[7] John G. West, *Stockholm Syndrome Christianity: Why Christian Leaders Are Failing — and What We Can Do About It* (Seattle, WA: Discovery Institute Press, 2025), 16.
[8] The phrase "cultured despisers" derives from Freidrich Schleiermacher's essay, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799).
[9] Carl R. Trueman, "The Failure of Evangelical Elites," *First Things*, November 1, 2021, https://firstthings.com/issue/november-2021/.
[10] J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism*, New Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 6.

JASON LANE

Martin Luther's Reform of the Christian Life:

A Reflection on the Doctrine of Vocation

The late medieval church of the West taught that man had a natural capacity to become righteous with the help of divine grace. According to the teaching of Gabriel Biel (1420–1495), for example, man must simply do what is within himself (*facere quod in se est*), that is, he must draw on his own natural powers (*ex puris naturalibus*) to receive grace. It was thought that man, by doing good and righteous works according to his own powers, could become righteous before God. No Christian would deny that God's grace offered in the church was necessary for salvation, but Biel and others taught that grace must be accompanied by right intentions and right actions. God's grace was understood as a kind of divine energy which served as a starting point and an aid for man to become righteous in the sight of God. Many people sought the assurance of God's grace by fleeing the world's affairs and dedicating their lives to the church. They took vows and entered holy orders to become nuns or monks, because they regarded the monastic life as the holiest life possible and the surest way to earn God's favor. Martin Luther (1483–1546) was one of those many people.

Luther's "evangelical breakthrough" came as the gospel broke through to him from the text of Holy Scripture. He recounted later in life that his study of St. Paul's letters opened to him something entirely different than the doctrine of grace that he had been taught. Luther discovered in Scripture the passive righteousness, a righteousness that is not fulfilled by human effort but received by faith as a gift.[1] He had learned very well in his monastic life that he was a sinner. Even

[1] Martin Luther, "Preface to the Latin Writings" (1545): vol. 34, p. 337, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress,

if, at his best, he did what God commanded outwardly, such as pray at the appointed times and obey in earthly matters, his heart and inner life were nevertheless corrupt and sinful beyond measure. He learned from St. Paul that, sinful as he was, God justified him by faith alone in Christ apart from works.[2]

After Luther believed the gospel for himself, his bold teaching concerning the righteousness of faith liberated souls in Germany and beyond from the burden to become righteous by doing righteous deeds. Human effort, charity, or good intentions, Luther taught, are not the reason that God loves sinful human beings. He loves them for the sake of His Son, who became man, who suffered and died to pay for human sinning. Now God counts a person's faith in Christ as righteousness (Gen 15:6; Rom 3:28; Rom 4:1-5). No works are necessary for man's salvation. God does not need our works, but our neighbors do. The implications of this distinction between faith and love or law and gospel are profound and reshaped life in society and in the church.

One may ask, if our works, our duties, even

1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–), hereafter *LW*; here *LW* 34:337. Luther recalls that he discovered the righteousness of faith in his study of Romans 1:16–17. "At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."' There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness is revealed by the gospel, namely the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God."

[2] *LW* 26:253, *Commentary on Galatians* (1535). "Now to rely on the Law or on the works of the Law and to be a man of faith are altogether contrary, just as the devil and God, sin and righteousness, death and life are contrary. Those who rely on the Law are those who want to be justified through the Law; those who are men of faith are those who trust that they are justified solely by mercy. Anyone who says that righteousness is on the basis of faith damns and curses the righteousness of works; on the other hand, anyone who says that righteousness is on the basis of the Law damns and curses the righteousness of faith. Therefore these two are exact contraries."

our prayers do not make us holy or righteous, but only faith in Christ can, are our works even necessary? Luther anticipated this question and spent his life not only teaching the righteousness of faith, but also teaching Christian love as a fruit of faith. And it is in the realm of Christian love that Luther's doctrine of vocation takes shape.

Vocation has come into vogue among Luther scholars since the early 1900s as they began to consider the implications of Luther's thought on daily life and society. The most thorough treatment of Luther's teaching on vocation is Gustav Wingren's book, *Luther on Vocation*, first published in Swedish in 1942 and in English in 1957.[3] The doctrine has been popularized by Gene Edward Veith in his book, *God at Work*.[4] But what exactly is vocation and why was it so important to Luther? The term appears in three different ways in Scripture, and Luther recognized all of them. Most importantly, one is called by the gospel through faith in Christ (Rom 1:6; 1 Cor 1:26). The second way Scripture speaks of vocation, which Luther also maintains, is the call into the pastoral office, either immediately by Christ, as is the case for the apostles, or mediately by the church (Acts 6:3–6; 1 Tim 3:1–7; 5:22; 2 Tim 1:6). Finally, and only in one place, does Paul speak about vocation as a general term to mean a Christians station in the world (married, free, slave, master, etc.). Paul exhorts new Christians in Corinth to "let each remain in the calling in which he was called" (1 Cor 7:20). The term "calling" here refers not to a special call from God to be married or a virgin, to be a slave or a master, but it refers to the stations or walks of life that Christians find themselves, and in which any Christian can carry out God's command to love and serve others.

Luther believed with St. Augustine and the medieval church that God had established orders or estates in creation in which all hu-

[3] Gustav Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957).
[4] Gene Edward Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishing, 2002).

mans live and move and are placed in the world to do His will whether knowingly or unknowingly. The estates Luther regarded as God's orders are the church, the political realm, and the household (*ecclesia, politica, oeconomia*). God ordains and uses these three estates to govern His creation and bless it. He governs the inner life of man by the gospel and faith, to forgive sins and make forgiven sinners heirs of eternal life; He governs the external world and human interaction through the law, reason, and earthly government, to retrain wickedness and establish justice; He governs all humanity through the home by establishing marriage and blessing husband and wife with children, so that faith can be nurtured and morals taught. The home was also the place where people learned discipline, proper social interactions, and were trained in industry. These three realms were for Luther where Christians live for each other by faith.

To deny any of these orders or to seek life apart from them, Luther regarded as sin and enmity with God. Any activity within these realms that contradicted faith, Christian freedom in the Gospel, God's clear commands in Scripture, or Christian love, Luther also regarded as wicked and must be rejected by Christians. For example, Luther came to reject monastic vows because they do not have a command in God's word. God has not established monasticism in the church but rather men have invented it. The human institution of monasticism either enslaved consciences by demanding things not commanded by God or promoted spiritual pride by teaching that one can merit grace through works. Therefore, a monastic vow is evil in the sight of God and must be broken just as a vow to steal, lie, or murder must be broken.[5] Such monastic orders, then, stand in contrast with Luther's treatment of stations of life that God in His word has established but are carried out poorly or evilly. A pastor may have a clear vocation, but he does not fulfill it if he does not do what Christ commands of one in the office. Likewise, one may be a father or mother, child or servant, and thus belong to a household, an estate established by God. But that does not mean that those in the household always fulfill their duties and offices as parents, children, servants, etc. Each duty, office, and station has a particular word of God attached to it. Parents are to love, nurture, and teach their children. Children are to honor, love, and obey their parents. All these duties, offices, and stations are established in God's word and Luther organizes God's word concerning these duties and commands in his Catechism under "The Table of Duties." These teach Christians how to love and honor each other in the church, in the political realm, in the family, and generally in all matters of Christian charity.

For this reason, the term *calling* in the sense of station in life or the way one is set in relationship to others, as found in 1 Corinthians 7:20, cannot be understood apart from the call of the gospel and the ministry of the church through which God awakens faith, forgives sins, and gives eternal life. Those who are called by the gospel are made sons of God by faith. They are adopted and heirs of everlasting life and freed from the burden of justifying themselves by their works. God has already justified them in Christ. Luther believed that the call of the gospel and faith in Christ reshaped all of life. All who believe are set free to live selflessly and recklessly in love for their neighbor regardless of which station God in His goodness has placed them. God's word, Luther taught, gives direction to each walk of life.

In discussing Luther's doctrine of vocation, I am convinced it is best to avoid, as Luther does, calling a particular occupation, such as nurse, baker, lawyer or whatever other earthly occupations there may be, a vocation. Vocation as Lutherans speak about it today sometimes misses how central the call

[5] Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 2.

"Vocation for Luther was always love and service for others as commanded in God's word and established in His orders."

to faith in Christ is for Luther. With good intentions, Lutherans want to show how Luther's teaching of faith made the ordinary sacred. And he did that. However, it is also possible that by concentrating so intently on our vocation and our work, we make Christ and the sacred ordinary. Luther taught faith in Christ, which allowed him to place works and love in their proper place, in service to others. He generally avoided the term vocation to talk about occupation or even being a parent or child, because vocation is not about oneself. Those who wish to contemplate "their vocation" and what they should be doing are most often thinking about themselves. Vocation for Luther was always love and service for others as commanded in God's word and established in His orders. For this reason, he preferred terms such as station, estate, office, duty, or responsibility, and he was flexible with the terms depending on the context. This does not answer every question about how one should speak about having different stations of life at the same time, when the demands of love within those stations seem to conflict with one another. Should I take care of my aging parents or concentrate my effort on raising my own children and caring for them? The answer to such questions is not found in the law, because God's law commands that one do both. That is why Luther taught faith in Christ and God's forgiveness for those who are weak and for those whose love is insufficient to love all those whom God gives them.

Luther consistently taught that Christians should hold fast to Christ and His righteousness and pour themselves out selflessly for others wherever they find themselves. Only the one who has Christ by faith can begin in any way to love another rightly. The unbeliever cannot do that. He does not have the call of the gospel and therefore, without faith, he cannot please God, even if his works may outwardly look similar to that of Christians. Here we can learn from Luther (and St. Paul) that whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (Rom 14:23). On the other hand, whatever does proceed from faith pleases God for the sake of Christ.

Although Luther's reform efforts remained concentrated on the inner life of every Christian, they extended into almost all areas of sixteenth-century life. Perhaps it is because he sought to reform the inner life that his teaching shaped so much of ordinary life. As Christ says, a good tree bears good fruit (Matt 17:7). No longer must we become nuns or monks to assure ourselves that we are pleasing to God. Now, butchers and bakers and mothers and children and businessmen and administrative assistants can be pleasing to God by faith, so that the works they do can be selfless and for the good of their neighbor. Thus, Luther's teaching of the righteousness of faith reshaped society by directing faith to Christ and not to oneself, so that those who have been justified and are pleasing to God for Christ's sake could direct their love and mercy outward to those who need it here below.

Jason D. Lane is Associate Professor of Historical Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO.

MARTIN LUTHER

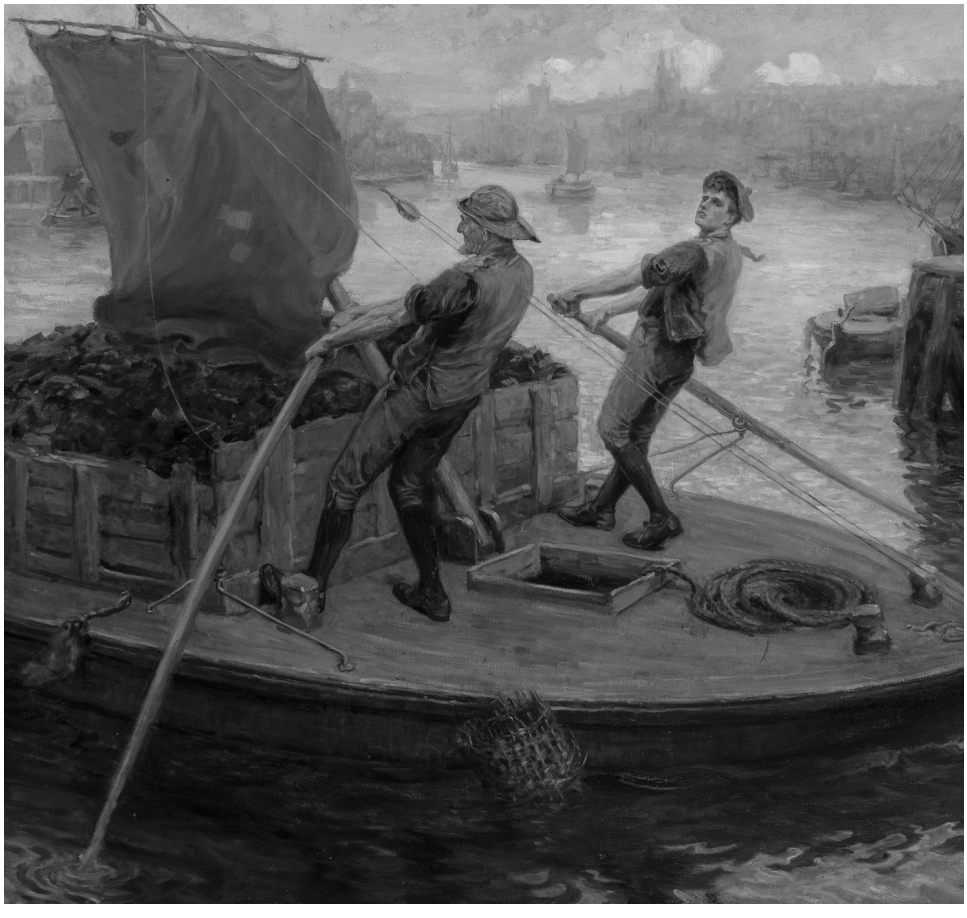
From the Archives

True Worship and the Idolatry of Works in the Christian Life

The Christian life is lived by faith in the Son of God, who gave his life as a ransom to free those in bondage to sin and to give them everlasting life — a pure gift of God, without any human effort. The sinful human heart, however, looks elsewhere to find comfort and help. It looks not to God's justification for Christ's sake, which is to be received by faith alone, but seeks instead help elsewhere. Sometimes it finds help in some other god of a false religion, sometimes in material possessions or money, sometimes in other people or substances, but most often the sinner seeks self-help, to justify himself by his works.

This well-known selection from Martin Luther, a sermon on the First Commandment from the *Large Catechism*,[1] is intended to help readers consider the place of works in the Christian life by first considering faith in God. Not only among some Lutherans, but among Protestant Christians more broadly there is a deep desire to make the works we do meaningful. Basic duties and responsibilities that God has commanded each person in his or her walk of life are now called by many in the Protestant churches "vocations." The term vocation to describe a Christian's work in the world has taken on strikingly similar tones to that of medieval Catholicism with

1 Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism" in *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church: German-Latin-English* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921). The text may be found in the public domain here: https://bookofconcord.org/large-catechism/.



its self-chosen works. The Roman Catholic Church made a distinction between spiritual vocations or holy orders and the earthly and thus less spiritual responsibilities of the common people. It is common to hear among Protestants today that to be doing God's work you need a vocation and not just a job. God can't be in the mundane, we think, so we seek to spiritualize the mundane and have God bless our self-chosen or at least our self-preferred works.

Luther is helpful because he sees through veiled self-righteousness better than most. He recognizes that our search for meaning in our work is, like all self-interest, idolatry. God-pleasing works are those that proceed from faith in Christ and have God's command. They are not for us, to make us holy or to justify us, but to help others. That is why God has commanded them. They are to be selfless, directed entirely outward to others, just as all of God's works for our good are selfless, given by grace, without any merit or worthiness in us.[2]

TRUE WORSHIP AND THE IDOLATRY OF WORKS IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

The following is excerpted from Martin Luther's, The Large Catechism.

Lo, here you have the meaning of the true honor and worship of God, which pleases

2 We thank Jason Lane for selecting and graciously writing this brief introduction to the following excerpt from Martin Luther.

God, and which He commands under penalty of eternal wrath, namely, that the heart know no other comfort or confidence than in Him, and do not suffer itself to be torn from Him, but, for Him, risk and disregard everything upon earth. On the other hand, you can easily see and judge how the world practises only false worship and idolatry. For no people has ever been so reprobate as not to institute and observe some divine worship; every one has set up as his special god whatever he looked to for blessings, help, and comfort.

Thus, for example, the heathen who put their trust in power and dominion elevated Jupiter as the supreme god; the others, who were bent upon riches, happiness, or pleasure, and a life of ease, Hercules, Mercury, Venus, or others; women with child, Diana or Lucina, and so on; thus every one made that his god to which his heart was inclined, so that even in the mind of the heathen to have a god means to trust and believe. But their error is this, that their trust is false and wrong; for it is not placed in the only God, besides whom there is truly no God in heaven or upon earth. Therefore the heathen really make their self-invented notions and dreams of God an idol, and put their trust in that which is altogether nothing. Thus it is with all idolatry; for it consists not merely in erecting an image and worshiping it, but rather in the heart, which stands gaping at something else, and seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, or devils, and neither cares for God, nor looks to Him for so much good as to believe that He is willing to help, neither believes that whatever good it experiences comes from God.

Besides, there is also a false worship and extreme idolatry, which we have hitherto practised, and is still prevalent in the world, upon which also all ecclesiastical orders are founded, and which concerns the conscience alone, that seeks in its own works help, consolation, and salvation, presumes to wrest heaven from God, and reckons how many bequests it has made, how often it has fasted, celebrated Mass, etc. Upon such things it depends, and of them boasts, as though unwilling to receive anything from God as a gift, but desires itself to earn or merit it superabundantly, just as though He must serve us and were our debtor, and we His liege lords. What is this but reducing God to an idol, yea, [a fig image or] an apple-god, and elevating and regarding ourselves as God? But this is slightly too subtile, and is not for young pupils.

But let this be said to the simple, that they may well note and remember the meaning of this commandment, namely, that we

are to trust in God alone, and look to Him and expect from Him naught but good, as from one who gives us body, life, food, drink, nourishment, health, protection, peace, and all necessaries of both temporal and eternal things. He also preserves us from misfortune, and if any evil befall us, delivers and rescues us, so that it is God alone (as has been sufficiently said) from whom we receive all good, and by whom we are delivered from all evil. Hence also, I think, we Germans from ancient times call God (more elegantly and appropriately than any other language) by that name from the word Good, as being an eternal fountain which gushes forth abundantly nothing but what is good, and from which flows forth all that is and is called good.

For even though otherwise we experience much good from men, still whatever we receive by His command or arrangement is all received from God. For our parents, and all rulers, and every one besides with respect to his neighbor, have received from God the command that they should do us all manner of good, so that we receive these blessings not from them, but, through them, from God. For creatures are only the hands, channels, and means whereby God gives all things, as He gives to the mother breasts and milk to offer to her child, and corn and all manner of produce from the earth for nourishment, none of which blessings could be produced by any creature of itself.

Therefore no man should presume to take or give anything except as God has commanded, in order that it may be acknowledged as God's gift, and thanks may be rendered Him for it, as this commandment requires. On this account also these means of receiving good gifts through creatures are not to be rejected, neither should we in presumption seek other ways and means than God has commanded. For that would not be receiving from God, but seeking of ourselves.

Let every one, then, see to it that he esteem this commandment great and high above all things, and do not regard it as a joke. Ask and examine your heart diligently, and you will find whether it cleaves to God alone or not. If you have a heart that can expect of Him nothing but what is good, especially in want and distress, and that, moreover, renounces and forsakes everything that is not God, then you have the only true God. If, on the contrary, it cleaves to anything else, of which it expects more good and help than of God, and does not take refuge in Him, but in adversity flees from Him, then you have an idol, another god.

GREG GILBERT



The Goodness and Dignity of Work

Christians have a complicated relationship with work. Some of us treat our jobs as if they're the great purpose that gives life its meaning — the place where we find our identity, our sense of worth, our deepest satisfaction. Others tend to regard work as a necessary evil, little more than the grind we endure to get on to the things that really matter: family, ministry, rest, the weekend. Both instincts are understandable, but both are wrong. The Bible grounds the dignity of work in something far more foundational than either productivity or duty. It grounds it in the character of God himself and our image-bearing relationship to him.

GOD WORKED

Before God ever told anyone else to work, he worked. The first chapter of Genesis presents God not merely as a designer or an architect, but as someone doing the "manual labor" of forming and filling a world, though of course he does it all by simply speaking. He separates light from darkness. He gathers the waters and raises the dry land. He stocks the seas with life and fills the skies with birds. There is a patient, purposeful craftsmanship to it all — six days of bringing beauty and order out of what was, at the start, formless and empty. The Hebrew words in the text are vivid: the earth was *tohu wabohu*, unorganized and void. And over the course of

a week, God shaped that void into something extraordinary.

He also took pleasure in what he made. That's what the refrain "and God saw that it was good" is telling us. The text isn't interested in giving us a quality-control report; it's showing us divine delight. Each time the creation takes a step closer to being a home fit for human beings, God pauses and declares that it is good. And by the end, with human beings on the scene, it's not just good but *very* good. From the very beginning, therefore, the God of the universe has been a worker, and the very first thing we learn about his work is that it brought him joy.

Now, there's something precise worth noting here. Only God *creates* in the strict sense of the term — that is, speaking to nothingness and making something appear. That kind of *ex nihilo* power belongs to him alone. But the pattern is unmistakable: work, the bringing of order out of chaos and beauty out of emptiness, is something God himself does before he ever asks anyone else to do it.

MADE TO WORK AS KINGS AND PRIESTS

When God finishes his own work and places the first human being in the Garden of Eden, it's no surprise that he gives him a job. Genesis 2:15 says that God put Adam in the garden "to work it and keep it." At first glance, that sounds like gardening — till the soil, plant the seeds, pull the weeds. But something far more profound is going on.

Those two words, "work" and "keep," are used together like that in only one other place in the Old Testament: in the book of Numbers, where they describe the job of the Levites in the tabernacle. The Levites were to *work* in the tabernacle and *guard* it. In other words, the language of Genesis 2 is priestly language. The Garden of Eden is being presented as a kind of temple, a place where God and human beings dwell together, and Adam is being set apart as a priest in that temple, charged with doing its work and guarding it from evil.

In addition to the priestly language, there's a royal dimension, too. Just a chapter earlier, God had told the man and woman to "subdue the earth" and "have dominion" over it. That's the essence of what it means to be made in God's image. It wasn't primarily about creativity or reason or the capacity for relationship, though those things are certainly true of us. It was about *rule*. When an ancient king set up an image of himself on a hilltop, the point was representation: this image reflects my rule, it proclaims my authority, it declares my kingship. That's what it means for human beings to be the image of God. You and I are his representatives in the world, his servant-kings, placed here to exercise authority on his behalf over everything he has made.

I hope you can see what this means for our work. Adam's job in the garden was simultaneously kingly, priestly, and worshipful. He was exercising dominion over the world as God's representative, serving in God's dwelling place as his priest, and obeying God's commands as an act of worship. And all of this was happening *before sin entered the world*. Therefore, we can say confidently that work is not a result of the Fall. It's woven into the original fabric of what it means to be human. When we bring order out of chaos, beauty out of ugliness — assembling, repairing, cultivating, creating — we are doing what our Father does. Like Father, like son.

THE CURSE FELL ON THE GROUND, NOT ON WORK ITSELF

This is where a lot of Christians get confused. Genesis 3 tells us that after Adam and Eve rebelled against God, the consequences were catastrophic. God pro-

nounced curses on the serpent, the woman, and the man, and everything that had been easy became hard. For the man specifically, the curse affected his *work*:

> Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you (Genesis 3:17–18).

But notice something here. God cursed the *ground*, not work itself. The man's calling to bring order out of the earth didn't change; what changed was that the earth now fights back. Instead of enjoying the abundant bounty of the garden, man would now toil and sweat just to scrape food out of the hostile ground, and he'd do it every day until he returned to the dust from which he was made and with which he wrestled every day of life. Work became hard, but it didn't become bad. Its dignity survived the Fall.

This distinction matters enormously, because many Christians assume that because work is difficult, it must be part of the curse — something to be endured and one day escaped. That's not the right way to think about it, though. *Toil* is part of the curse. *Work* predates it. The thorns and the sweat are consequences of sin, but the calling to cultivate and bring order is a gift that God gave before anything went wrong. Getting these two things confused — the goodness of work and the painfulness of toil — is one of the surest ways to end up either despising your job or expecting it to be something it was never meant to be.

GRACE WOVEN THROUGH THE CURSE

So God has decreed that work will now be hard and painful, but at the same time he's done something entirely unexpected: He mingles that frustration with joy. Ecclesiastes puts it plainly:

> It is good and proper for a man to

> eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him — for this is his lot. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil — this is a gift of God (Ecclesiastes 5:18–19).

Think about that for a moment. Why is work toilsome to begin with? Because God cursed it on account of our rebellion against him. The sweat and frustration of work are part of his judgment. And yetc—cand yet!c—cin his love, God has decided that even in the judgment we should have enjoyment. Even as we toil and sweat and get frustrated, we find a measure of satisfaction and pleasure in the process. There's no contradiction there, just amazing grace. In fact, it's the same kind of grace we see in Genesis 3:21, when God stoops down and makes clothes of animal skin for the very rebels he has just sentenced. He doesn't owe them kindness, but he gives it anyway. In the same way, he doesn't owe us enjoyment in our work, but he gives that, too.

WORKING FOR THE KING

So where does all of this leave us? If work carries this kind of dignity — rooted in God's own character, woven into the fabric of image-bearing, surviving the Fall intact and even graced by God in the midst of the curse — then it matters enormously how we approach it, especially as those who have been given spiritual life in Christ. We don't work primarily to find our identity, and we don't work merely to pay our bills. We work because this is what image-bearers do. We work because our Father worked, and he made us to carry his work forward in the world. We work because even now, under the curse, the King who sentenced us also sustains us with the gift of satisfaction in our labor. Paul captures this in a single sentence:

> Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving (Colossians 3:23–24).

There it is, the theological capstone of everything Genesis has been building toward. You are an image-bearer of the living God, placed in this world to exercise dominion on his behalf, and the work you do — whether you are reconciling accounts or repairing engines or raising children or managing a team — is the daily arena where New Covenant servant-kings do their Father's work. So do it with all your heart, because you know whom you are doing it for.

Greg Gilbert is Senior Pastor at Third Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

BRADLEY G. GREEN

On Being a Theologian and Teacher

It is a bit intimidating or challenging to be asked to write an essay on the vocation of being a theologian or teacher. *Am* I really a "theologian"? I find it easier to accept the title "teacher," but "theologian"? On paper it would seem I am a theologian. I am nearing the 30-year mark of teaching theology in a university setting, and will soon be moving institutions to teach in a seminary setting. So, even if I tremble a bit to call myself a "theologian," if the shoe fits . . .

I have focused my attention in this essay on several areas, and will cover these in turn: (1) my own call and journey to the role of being a theologian and teacher; (2) the actual task of being a theologian and teacher; and finally, (3) I will conclude with a few general reflections on what have learned as I enter into my seventh decade.

MY OWN CALL AND JOURNEY TOWARD BEING A THEOLOGIAN AND TEACHER

I became a Christian when I was a boy—a 12-year-old boy in Anchorage, Alaska. I grew up in a somewhat secular setting, though there was a vibrant Christian minority in Anchorage. I was surrounded by unbelievers, various groups like the Mormons, and a few Christians. I remember sitting in my pastor's office, trying to get a hold on what I believed. What *did* it mean to be a Baptist?

When I went to university (Northeast Louisiana University, in Monroe, Louisiana), I was growing in my faith and would eventually stumble into the works of C.S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer. It was also during the height of the charismatic movement, so there was all of that to try and figure out. Toward the end of university I enrolled at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. And as soon as I graduated from university, I packed my car and was on my way to Louisville.

I have given lectures for almost thirty years on how to discern the will of God. It is much easier to give lectures on discerning the will of God than to actually discern the will of God. I loved seminary, and I loved stumbling into this or that theological issue, and realizing that I had oh so much to learn. As I neared the end of seminary I realized I wanted to continue to study. So, I began to cast around for what might be the next step. I settled on a masters program, the newly started Th.M. program at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. This would allow me to study in particular with three stellar scholars: Millard Erickson (who came to SWBTS the same time I did), James Leo Garrett (perhaps the preeminent scholar of Baptist theology of his era), and E. Earle Ellis (one of the finest New Testament scholars of his era). It was a dream team, and I am still thankful for the influence of each of these men.

During the one year of course work toward the Th.M., and the one year of thesis writing to follow, I was feeling more and more convinced that I was on the right track. I wanted to continue to study, and would soon enroll in the Ph.D. program at Baylor University.

It is worth pausing for a moment. The call to academic study, as well as to the academic life of scholarship and teaching can likely be a mixed bag. That is, it can be hard to disentangle the desire for further study from "empty ambition" (Colossians 2:8), and from the knowledge which "puffs up" (1 Corinthians 8:1). So, there is little doubt that I likely had a mix of motives: some more or less good and right, and some concerned with making a name for myself (being "known," etc.). I take solace that the same—or similar—temptations could bedevil virtually any vocational path. Whether we should follow Luther's counsel to "sin boldly" I do not know, but it seems clear that we have no option as finite creatures but to follow the Lord the best we know how, knowing that we will almost always have

a complicated stew of motives.

Perhaps one of the best ways I can summarize my growing sense that I ought to pursue the life of teaching and scholarship was simply the growing desire to do so—though I grant "desire" can be difficult to always trust. But there was a growing sense that I ought to pursue the life of teaching and scholarship.

I should also add that there were key persons who at key moments affirmed my efforts and offered a sort of confirmation of where I thought I was headed. Those stories are best shared privately.

THE TASK OF BEING A THEOLOGIAN AND TEACHER

I remember in my Ph.D. program one of the professors asked me what was most important to me in terms of my theological and writing interests. I said that I wanted to try and articulate the Christian faith vis-à-vis our contemporary moment. That is, I was interested in thinking through and articulating the Christian faith against the backdrop of our current age. The professor with whom I was speaking had no real idea how to respond. It was as if such an interest was completely foreign to him. I *now* know that the impulse to which I was giving voice was *really* simply a rather traditional understanding of the nature of theology. That is, at least one of the central tasks of the theologian is to try and articulate the biblical understanding of God and God's ways with the world, and to try and do so in a way that communicates to one's own age. That is simply what theology *is*.

I suppose teaching is an art and a science. I have told students that when a student registers for a class, what they are really registering for—in a sense—*is that professor*. If the teacher is actually a teacher, what the students encounter in the classroom is the particular subject *mediated by that particular professor*. I think this is simply inescapable. James 3 talks about the great level of judgment which faces teachers:

> Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

I think James is likely thinking of teachers in a church context, but there is probably an analog for other teachers or professors, especially those who teach in the realm of Bible, theology, church history, etc. The influence that a teacher can have is profound—all the more reason to be well-read, diligent, honest, and prepared.

The fact that there is a higher judgment for teachers (even though James is most likely speaking *directly* of teachers in the church) should spur theologians and teachers on to deep and consistent times of study. We have all, most likely, known of teachers who may or may not have engaged in such study. Perhaps they earned their Ph.D., and have essentially somewhat coasted after that time. That simply should not be an option for the conscientious and diligent theologian or teacher. I still live in the city and teach in the institution at which I began to teach 28 years ago. I will not uncommonly see students I taught from the beginning of my teaching career. I will sometimes joke (?) that I wish I could have them in class again, because I have improved a lot since that time. I certainly *should* be a better teacher and theologian than the person I was almost three decades ago. A good theologian and teacher is one who is always honing and improving in one's craft.

SOME REFLECTIONS

Let me share one idea related to the craft of being a theologian and teacher—the task of writing. I think it is completely possible to be an excellent teacher and

never produce this or that piece of scholarship. At the same time, there is a kind of "fittingness" that exists between the craft of being a theologian or teacher and writing. Perhaps this is in part because of an insight that Augustine wrote about in *City of God*. Augustine could write that persons learn what they think about something by writing about it. That is, it is through the actual task and discipline of writing that one—at least more thoroughly and deeply—grasps what one thinks or believes.

This is analogous to what happens in the classroom or pulpit. In my experience, shared by others with whom I speak, the thinking and writing process works something like the following. One is in the midst of lecturing or preaching, and all of a sudden one has an insight or thought which (seemingly?) had not been fully formulated until that point. But in the midst of teaching or preaching, one thinks: "Yes, that is what I have been trying to work out." I believe this happens in a certain way when writing. As one writes, one is forced to take what might be somewhat unformed or undeveloped thoughts, and work them through. As one writes, one realizes what one is getting at. In short, the task or discipline of writing forces one to truly develop and clarify what one really thinks.

CONCLUSION

I am now in my seventh decade, and will (Lord willing), soon complete thirty years of teaching. I hope I will teach for many more years. It is a humbling reality to be a theologian and teacher (or it certainly *should* be). One is, at least potentially, shaping a generation of persons in their thinking about the most important issues imaginable—who God is, what other things are in relation to God, and how God and the world relate. These are weighty matters indeed. The theologian and teacher should most certainly be humbled, because this person has been called to spend a life (or part of a life) stewarding the mysteries of God. The true theologian must therefore engage in the basics, repeatedly and faithfully: study and pray, study and pray, study and pray.

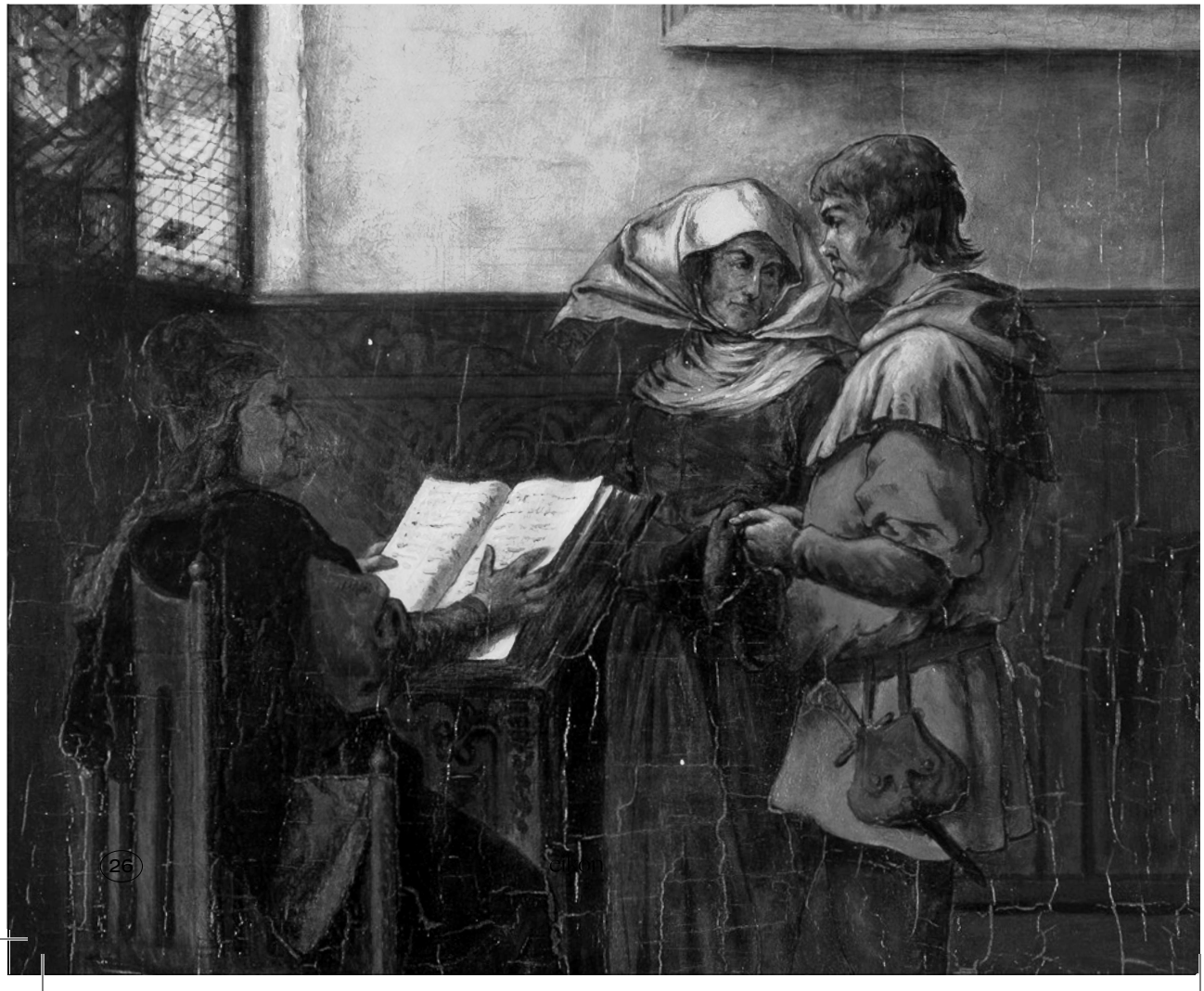
Bradley G. Green taught theology and related disciplines for 28 years, and is moving to Southern Seminary (Louisville) this fall to serve as Professor of Philosophy and Christian Theology. He and his wife Dianne have three children, and helped start Augustine School, a Christian liberal arts school in Jackson, Tennessee.

ROB LISTER

Theology for Marriage:

Five Doctrinal Applications

Rob Lister serves as Professor of Theology at the Talbot School of Theology, Biola University.



My wife and I entered the world of marital and pre-marital ministry the better part of two decades ago, with expressions of that service in our church context as well as in a course I regularly teach to undergrads.[1] Over those years, we've worked with dozens upon dozens of exuberant dating and engaged couples, many of whom have later boomeranged back in our direction with requests for counsel and encouragement as the joyful day of "saying the vow" gave way to other days that required "paying" the "for worse" part of the vow. At times, we've partnered in service to couples in severe marital crisis. And of course, we've had to learn to navigate the experience of both delight and difficulty in our own marriage.

One of the things that has stood out to us in these varied ministries is just how vitally sustaining the embrace of good theology is to the formation and growth of healthy marriages. In our day, perhaps like never before, it is plainly evident that we need a robust theology *of* marriage. But for those entering or already in the covenant of marriage, it is equally urgent to emphasize just how much Christian couples need theology *for* conducting their marriages well.

For my purposes in this article, I'm assuming agreement with a standard definition of marriage like this one from John Stott, "Marriage is an exclusive heterosexual covenant between one man and one woman, ordained and sealed by God, preceded by a public leaving of parents, consummated in sexual union, issuing in a permanent mutually supportive partnership, and normally crowned by the gift of children."[2] From that shared commitment then, my primary intent is to make a number of gospel-based doctrinal applications that offer sustenance for those who would seek to walk well together in marriage. While a great deal more could be said about each one, for those who are doing married life, or doing marriage ministry, a doctrinal flyover, like the one offered here, can be a significant at-a-glance resource for faithfully navigating the multitude of days that follow the making of the marital vow.[3] We'll begin with a reflection on the cornerstone of the theology *of* marriage before proceeding to sketch some ways that cornerstone gives rise to a robust theology *for* marriage.

1. REDEMPTIVE HISTORY AND THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE

The significance of marriage in the Bible is initially evident in the way that it structurally frames the beginning (Gen 2:15-25), the climax (Eph 5:22-31), and the end (Rev 19:6-9, 21:1-4) of the biblical storyline. Those markers, in turn, draw our attention to the fact that something that includes, yet also transcends, human marriage is going on in the story of redemption. At the same time that the Scriptures declare something beautiful about the place of marriage in the story of redemption, they are also full of post-Fall examples of marriage — even among the heroes of the faith — that are mingled with sin, heartbreak, and grief.[4] Thus, it is readily evident from Scripture that the

[1] I would like to thank Ryan Lister, Fred Sanders, Erik Thoennes, and Mike Winger for reading and giving valuable feedback on portions of an earlier draft of this article. Their input undoubtedly strengthened the final product. Any errors or mistakes that remain are entirely my own.

[2] John Stott, *Involvement: Social and Sexual Relationships in the Modern World*, vol. 2 (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1984), 163. Marriage in Scripture, we may add, is a creation ordinance. It was neither ordained as an accommodation to creaturely fallenness, nor was it merely appointed as an institution and practice limited to the nation of Israel under the Old Covenant. That means the definition and distinctives of marriage are established by God and applicable to all of humanity, whether acknowledged or not. While unbelievers do not operate from a sense of obligation to God's Word, Christians should seek to submit themselves to all the relevant biblical directives, which for them as believers would additionally include marrying a fellow believer (e.g., 1 Cor 7:39).

[3] Assuredly, it is the case that these are not the only doctrines with valuable application to marriage. This article merely seeks to offer a sampling of the riches of applied theology to the context of married life.

[4] Consider these examples: Abraham's two-fold attempts to pass his wife Sarah off as merely his sister to save his own skin

"...the central meaning of marriage is found in its depiction of Christ's union with his bride, the church (Eph 5:28-32). Therefore, the couple's central pursuit is to re-enact that gospel relationship in one another's lives..."

effects of the Fall not only devastate our relationship with God, but ravage our relationships with others as well.[5]

The point from the outset then, is that when it comes to marriage, we must look to where our hope is rooted, namely in how God designed marriage ultimately to point beyond itself, as opposed to regarding marriage as an end in itself.[6] To that end, the central meaning of marriage is found in its depiction of Christ's union with his bride, the church (Eph 5:28-32).[7] Therefore, the couple's central pursuit is to re-enact that gospel relationship in one another's lives, which both serves to magnify Christ and minister to the couple's deepest need.[8] Put differently, little "m" marriage — the couple's union — matters chiefly because it was designed to reflect and magnify Capital "M" marriage, namely Christ's union with his church.

This is Paul's primary point when he quotes and interprets Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians 5:31-32,

> Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

In stating that marriage, from Eden forward, is a "mystery," Paul's point is not that marriage is hard to understand, but that it has always pointed to the most profound truth of Christ's union with the church, even though this revelation is only made known following the incarnate work of Christ.[9]

The central point that marriage was fundamentally designed to reflect Christ's

(Gen 12:10-20 & 20:1-13); Sarah's doubt-driven attempt to manipulate God's promise into fulfilment by giving her handmaid Hagar to Abraham as a wife (Gen 16:1-6); Laban's manipulation of Jacob into marrying Leah before Rachel (Gen 29-31); Judah and Tamar's sordid story (Gen 38); David's and Solomon's polygamous unions (2 Sam 3:2-5, 5:13, 1 Kgs 11:1-8); David's lust-inflamed immorality with Bathsheba (2 Sam 11); let alone the many infidelities of Israel toward her heavenly Father and Husband more broadly (Ezek 16).

[5] This is quickly evident in Genesis as the curse and expulsion from the Garden in Genesis 3 quickly gives rise in the narrative to fratricide in Genesis 4, followed by the drumbeat of death in Genesis 5 and the escalation of wickedness in Genesis 6 leading to God's flood judgment.

[6] To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, it asks too much of the spouse to bear the weight that only God can. As he more eloquently put it, "When I have learnt to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now. In so far as I learn to love my earthly dearest at the expense of God and *instead* of God, I shall be moving towards the state in which I shall not love my earthly dearest at all. When first things are put first, second things are not suppressed but increased." C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis. Vol. 3: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy, 1950–1963*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 247 (italics original).

[7] Ray Ortlund, *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 100–101.

[8] Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 45–47, 120–124. To my knowledge, the Keller's do not specifically use the term "re-enact the gospel," in *The Meaning of Marriage*, though they do describe the point there. They did, however, use that memorable terminology in a talk they gave together in 2005, which along with some of Tim's earlier teaching provided source material for the book. See https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/cultivating-a-healthy-marriage-part-1-lecture/.

[9] Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 395–397.

relationship to his church is also indirectly demonstrated in Jesus' teaching on divorce in Matthew 19. Following Jesus' exchange with the Pharisees on the matter of divorce and remarriage in verses 4–9, the disciples reacted vigorously to Jesus' teaching, exclaiming, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry" (Matt 19:10). Their comment betrays a lack of understanding of the God-centered meaning of marriage.[10] They were shocked at that moment by Jesus' high standard of marital commitment because they did not yet see that the worst thing about divorce is the way it misrepresents Jesus' commitment to his bride.

The upshot of all this, of course, is that the meaning of marriage is both deeply theological and deeply practical. To the degree that a couple's marriage centers itself on magnifying Christ's relationship to the church (e.g., patterning the gospel to one another time and again as they point one another regularly to Christ, confess sin, receive confession, practice forgiveness, intercede for one another, rejoice in one another's progress in faith, etc.), that marriage will not only experience growth in fulfilling its fundamental purpose, but it will do so by drawing on its most enduring strength. In so doing, couples can come to experience and reflect the goodness of being fully known and unconditionally loved — a glorious reality that is transcendently true for Christ's bride on account of the Gospel.[11]

2. JUSTIFICATION AND MARRIAGE

Sometimes, when couples begin carefully considering the Christ-centered meaning of marriage, their initial reaction is one of both encouragement and confusion — encouragement as to the Christ-magnifying essence of marriage, but confusion as to what it means, practically speaking, to reflect the gospel of Christ in their relationship. It's at this point that the doctrine of justification has immense practical relevance to marriage.

For the couple, the wedding day is a lot like the day of justification for the sinner, in that both legally establish us as something we, as yet, have no idea how to be, experientially speaking. Both the wedding day and the moment of justification establish this new standing with instant, declarative power.[12] In that sense, "I now pronounce you husband and wife" is declaratively analogous to "And he (Abram) believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6, cf. Rom 4). Therefore, the days of married life that follow the wedding day, like the days of sanctification for the believer, are days of experientially growing into the new standing that has already been legally established.

Practically speaking, in marriage as with justification, the matters of standing, security, and permanent commitment are established at the time of making the vow, as opposed to being earned continually thereafter. From that foundational security, couples are enabled to bear patiently with one another (e.g., Col 3:13) as they

[10] Not only was Jesus not commending the easy divorce policy of the Hillel school, he was also not requiring divorce in cases of *porneia* but only allowing it, contrary to the expectations of the Shammai school. For a thoughtful and thorough treatment on the New Testament material on divorce and remarriage, including the rabbinical schools of thought prevalent at the time, see, Andrew David Naselli, "What the New Testament Teaches About Divorce and Remarriage," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 24 (2019): 3–44. Naselli's specific treatment of Matthew 19 is found on pages 7–22.

[11] The Kellers beautifully express this point: "When over the years someone has seen you at your worst, and knows you with all your strengths and flaws, yet commits him — or herself to you wholly, it is a consummate experience. *To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God*. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us." Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 95 (italics added).

[12] Thomas R. Schreiner capably expounds the declarative nature of justification in his volume *Justification: An Introduction* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 73–78.

grow together in learning to fulfill the marital vow. This is the sort of security Christopher Ash commended when he criticized those who would belittle the importance of marriage as an institution. Ash notes:

> This is what happens when people say that "marriage is just a piece of paper." They are saying that we must not focus on cold outward institutional things, but on warm relational personal qualities. One famous theologian even said that a couple might be legally married but not really married because their personal relationship fell short of what it ought to be.
>
> All this talk sounds very warm and personal. But it is actually disastrous, because marriage is an institution, not an ideal. If we think of marriage as an ideal toward which we strive, we replace the security of a God-given institution by the fragility of a human project. That is, in Bible terms, we take the whole thing out of the realm of grace and into the cold wilderness of trying to do it all on our own.
>
> The reality is that marriage is a status that is entered, not an ideal toward which we aspire. It is a good institution, entered on the day a couple marry. And within that given institution, with its boundaries, they are called by God to live out their marriage. Within the security of the institution we may grow in safety and confidence; outside it we may strive, but always with that paralyzing fear that we are on our own.[13]

This is why I take Psalm 15:4 to be so vital to understanding the marital vow. In that passage, we discover that part of the answer to the question about who God will welcome (v. 1), is stated in these words: he "who swears to his own hurt and does not change" (v. 4b). Those are quite sobering words about what it means to vow something before the Lord, which found their apex in Jesus who had "sworn to his own hurt" (e.g., John 4:34, 6:38-40, Phil 2:5-11) by loving his people to the uttermost (John 13:1, 19:30).[14]

Similarly, on the wedding day, couples swear a vow that will cost them because they are establishing a new standing and pledging the security of fidelity — come what may. "Paying" that vow will cost the couple in ways they cannot foresee on the day they make the vow. But doing so both reflects the glory of Christ's love for his people that gives the security of a new standing first (e.g., Rom 5:1) and then presses us, as vow keepers, further into the mold of his likeness (Rom 8:29).[15]

3. RECONCILIATION AND HUSBANDLY HEADSHIP

To extend the previous point, we recognize that "paying" the vow will not be limited to generic seasons of "for worse" hardship. Sometimes spouses will be one another's occasion for hardships, and thus vow keeping will at times be required in response to sins and offenses committed

[13] Christopher Ash, *Married for God: Making Your Marriage the Best it Can Be* (Wheaton,IL: Crossway, 2016), 105.

[14] Whether this divine plan is best termed a "covenant of redemption" has been the subject of meaningful debate. The larger point, however, stands regardless of whether one believes invoking the language of "covenant" is apt or not. Stephen Wellum does a nice job of summarizing common affirmations of and objections to framing the eternal counsel of the Triune God specifically as the "covenant of redemption." Stephen J. Wellum, *Systematic Theology: From Canon to Concept*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024), 764–768.

[15] Per the Kellers, "In any relationship, there will be frightening spells in which your feelings of love seem to dry up. And when that happens you must remember that the essence of a marriage is that it is a covenant, a commitment, a promise of future love. So what do you do? You do the acts of love, despite your lack of feeling. You may not feel tender, sympathetic, and eager to please, but in your actions you must *be* tender, understanding, forgiving, and helpful. And, if you do that, as time goes on you will not only get through the dry spells, but they will become less frequent and deep, and you will become more constant in your feelings. This is what can happen if you decide to love." Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 104 (italics original).

by the spouse.

Doctrinally speaking, God, the one sinned against (Isa 59:2), effected our reconciliation by means of Christ's atoning sacrifice (Rom 5:8–11).[16] And, since as Paul Barnett rightly notes, "Reconciliation with God... implies reconciliation among God's people" (e.g., Matt 5:23–24, Eph 2:14–16),[17] it follows that those who have been forgiven and changed by Christ's costly love are called on to forgive others as we have been forgiven (Matt 6:14–15, Col– 3:13) by patterning God's reconciling love for us in Christ (2 Cor 5:17–21).[18] So, it is proper to consider the particular implications that reconciliation with God in Christ has for us in marriage.

When we consider these implications, it is important to keep in mind both that the husband in marriage is the analog of Christ and that the husband himself is not Christ (Eph 5:23–25). Because the husband is not Christ and is not sinless, it is obviously the case that both spouses will magnify Christ by forgiving the other's sin, pursuing reconciliation, and pointing the other to the good news of the cross as often as necessary (e.g., Eph 4:32–5:2, Rom 12:18, Col 3:12-13). Before proceeding too hastily and flattening marital distinction, however, we should linger over the implication that as the analog of Christ's self-giving love and service of leadership in relation to the church (Eph 5:25–30), there is an appropriate emphasis for the husband in taking initiative to pursue relational reconciliation in marriage.

Here's what I mean. In Ephesians 2:4–5, we learn that "even when we were dead in our trespasses," God made his people

"alive together with Christ" (cf., Eph 2:1–3). That is astonishingly good news! Had God not taken the reconciling initiative, or had Christ not paid the cost of our forgiveness, we would have remained dead in our trespasses and sins permanently.

In that light, how should the dynamics of marital headship factor in when sin needs to be forgiven in marriage? Consider the following, probably somewhat familiar, scenario. When the "communication cold war" between spouses kicks in, following

[16] John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955), 42.
[17] Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 303.
[18] Notice how, in 2 Corinthians 5:19–20, Paul argues that as one who has been reconciled to God through Christ, he is now an "ambassador" of that reconciling love to others. There he proclaims that "... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us...." Additionally, though illustrated by way of a negative example, this is precisely the point of Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:21–35). Put differently, a "heart" (v. 35) that is not eager to extend forgiveness horizontally is a heart that has not embraced the vast depths of forgiveness by God.

some form of offense, we might be acquainted with the internal logic that rationalizes, "Well, I am willing to forgive, but she hurt me with the things she said, so it's only fair that she should come and apologize before I forgive." The bottom line in such a scenario is that someone has to take the first step towards thawing the ice and pursuing relational reconciliation.

To be sure, each individual is responsible to repent and seek forgiveness when he or she is the offending party (Matt 5:23-24). So, again, it is appropriate for the wife to seek reconciliation when she is in the wrong. And yet, as the Ephesians 5 analog of Christ in relation to his bride, my point is simply that the husband always has a responsibility to take the lead in pursuing relational reconciliation, whether he's primarily at fault in the case of a given offense or not. In Christ's relationship to his own bride, he's only ever the one sinned against, and yet he is also the one who took the reconciling initiative when we had no warmth or inclination towards him whatsoever (Rom 5:8). When a husband demonstrates similar initiative by "nourishing and cherishing" his wife who is one with him as the church is one with Christ (Eph. 5:29-30), that initiative is a beautiful Christ-reflecting service of ministry to his wife who has chosen to submit to her husband's leadership.[19] What a gift to his wife for the husband to be quick to pursue, rather than to withdraw, in moments where she may feel relationally destabilized.[20] While she may "beat him to the punch" in seeking relational reconciliation at times, he should never sit back and wait for that to happen.

4. UNION WITH CHRIST AND MARITAL UNION

Back under point number one, we noted that marital union was designed by God to reflect the church's union with Christ. Now we need to expound that doctrine and application a bit more. Union with Christ is a kind of doctrinal ground zero for all the blessings of redemption since they are all given "in Christ."[21] Whereas justification grants a new legal standing based on the work of Christ for us, union with Christ establishes a new identity based on the vital union of Christ in us (Gal 2:20).[22] And that union with Christ — wrought by the indwelling Spirit (Rom 8:9) — grounds and calls us to live in step with our new identity (Rom 6:1–14, Gal 5:16–25).[23]

Dane Ortlund has compellingly illustrated, from Romans 6, how this new identity in Christ calls forth new ways of living:

> When Jesus went down into the grave to die for our sins, we too went with him down into the grave to die to our sins. What would we say to an adopted orphan wandering out the front door of the mansion of his new family and down to the food stamps

[19] Those who would hesitate against emphasizing the husband's responsibility might stress that Scripture instructs all believers generically to pursue reconciliation (e.g., Col 2:12–13, Matt 5:23–24, Matt 18:15). That principle is true so far as it goes. However, as we have been detailing, the Ephesians 5 meaning of marriage also needs to be factored into the particular relational dynamics of marriage. For, in marriage, there is a specificity of roles unique to the relationship between husband and wife (as analogs of Christ and the church respectively) that is not in play more generically in the case of an offense between a person and his "brother."

[20] When the couple's relational stability feels dicey due to an argument or offense of some kind, that's a critical opportunity to reiterate the objective permanency that undergirds their relationship and move towards one another in a manner that allows the vow to have the "upper hand" relative to the feelings in that moment. A friend and fellow elder employs a practice he calls "improvising the vow" in these sorts of situations. If his wife needs space to process, he's happy to provide that. But he will also take the opportunity, even if briefly, to restate the permanency of his vow, for example, by gently reaching for her hand and saying something like, "I'm committed to us and to our partnership no matter what. I'm here for all of it." Even if the rest of the relational "thawing" takes some time, a practice like this can be a turning point type of first step in the direction of that thawing, by emphasizing the objective permanency of their vow.

[21] Schreiner, *Justification*, 127–128.

[22] Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 67.

[23] Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 171.

line? We'd say: *What are you doing? That's not who you are anymore.*[24]

As we will see, something reflective of that great union is true of marriage as well.[25] We've noted that in Ephesians 5:31, Paul quotes Genesis 2:24. Ray Ortlund very helpfully points out that in the context of Genesis 2 itself, becoming "one flesh" (Gen. 2:24) "points back to the fact that Eve was the bone and flesh of Adam" in Genesis 2:23.[26] In the context of Ephesians 5, however, the quotation of Genesis 2:24 "points back to the fact that we are members of Christ's body" as Paul has just argued in Ephesians 5:29–30.[27] That love of Christ for the church that unites his people to him as "members of his body" (v. 30) is the reason people marry. Ortlund explains, "Look at the logic: 'We are members of his body. *Therefore* a man shall leave his father and his mother."[28]

Since Paul's point is that union with Christ is the archetypal "mystery" that underlies human marital union, it follows that our marital unions ought also to call forth similar fruit to that which is born from our union with Christ. Here's what I mean: In the appeal to Romans 6 above, we noted that union with Christ grounds and gives rise to the believer's mode of living in step with this new "in Christ" identity. So too then does human marriage, as a reflection of that greater union, establish a new union that grounds and calls for the couple's mode of living in step with their new "one flesh" identity.

Put differently, the reality of "union" in both cases call forth a response of cultivating relational "communion."[29] Just as union with Christ grounds the remaining aspects of our salvation, including those that are currently being and yet to be experienced (e.g., progressive sanctification and glorification), so too does the marital union ground and call for the growing pursuit of the holistic and experiential elements of that union. For our purposes in this article, we can refer to that pursuit following the marriage vow as the cultivation of holistically growing marital intimacy.

With respect to marriage, it's too common notionally to reduce the meaning of marital intimacy to that of sexual expression. To be sure, the couple certainly participates in marital union in the "one flesh" intimacy of the marriage-bed. However, sex in marriage was designed by God as the covenant sign of the marital union to symbolize and point toward a broader marriage-wide intimacy between husband and wife.[30] Per Genesis 2:24, the

[24] Dane Ortlund, *Deeper: Real Change for Real Sinners* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 52 (Italics original).

[25] To be sure, union with Christ is so great a mystery that it transcends any merely creation based "shadows" of that union, including the marital union, even as the marital union is likely the chief of all the earthly shadows. Edward Polhill stressed this in commenting, "The Holy Ghost, in condescension to our weakness, shadows out this Union by many earthly patterns, *viz*. by the Law-union of a King and Subjects; by the Love-union of an Husband and Wife; by the Artificial union of the Foundation and Building; by the Natural union of the Vine and Branches, the Head and Members; by the intimate union and incorporation of the Food and the Body. There is that in the Mystical union which answer; to all these earthly patterns; and withal, that which as much exceeds them, as a substance doth a shadow." Edward Polhill, *Christus in Corde, or, The Mystical Union Between Christ and Believers Considered in Its Resemblances, Bonds, Seals, Privileges and Marks* (Thomas Cockerill, 1680), unnumbered page of preface.

[26] Ortlund, *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*, 100.

[27] Ortlund, *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*, 100.

[28] Ortlund, *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*, 99-100 (Italics original).

[29] In the case of the believer's union with Christ, Kelly Kapic made the distinction this way, "*Communion* with God … is distinct from union. Those who are united to Christ are called to *respond* to God's loving embrace. While union with Christ is something that does not ebb and flow, one's experience of communion with Christ can fluctuate…. When a believer grows comfortable with sin … this invariably affects the level of intimacy this person feels with God…. While a saint's consistency in prayer, corporate worship, and biblical meditation are not things that make God love him more or less, such activities tend to foster the beautiful experience of communion with God." Kelly M. Kapic, "Worshiping the Triune God: The Shape of John Owen's Trinitarian Spirituality," Introduction to *Communion with the Triune God*, by John Owen, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 21 (Italics original).

[30] For more on the relation of sex in marriage to the couple's broader pursuits of intimacy, see my exposition of the meaning of marital sexual intimacy in "The Beautiful Meaning of Marital Sexual Intimacy," *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 3.1 (Spring

"one flesh" sign of marital intimacy is only meant to occur in the "leave and cleave" context where all the other relevant marital intimacies are being pursued, by prioritizing this new marital relationship in its multiple dimensions (e.g., spiritual, emotional, economic, physical etc.) above all other relationships, including the family of origin.[31]

Along those lines, practically speaking, we've come to commend this multi-dimensional pursuit of intimacy with the following rubric: Face-to-Face intimacy, Side-by-Side intimacy, and Back-to-Back intimacy.[32] It may help to think of these areas of intimacy cultivation as being to marriage what the spiritual disciplines are to the cultivation of our communion with Christ.

1) *Face-to-Face*: Here we have in mind the dimension of intimacy that can be described with the image of each spouse facing the other. This would include the ongoing pursuits of companionship, friendship, dating, and playfulness. The ongoing enjoyment of marital sexual intimacy fits in this category, as does the cultivation of a healthy communication climate.[33] It is critical that the couple continues enjoying and liking one another in marriage, for a lack of relational warmth is an indicator that the relationship is entering the danger zone.[34]

Interestingly, face-to-face expressions of intimacy are the ones most naturally pursued in dating, since the infatuation levels are high and the side-by-side pursuits of things like managing a household have not yet come into play. Yet, the face-to-face dimension is also easily displaced, little by little, once the side-by-side partnership begins expanding in marriage. The most dangerous forms of drift always occur in increments that are undetectable if unmonitored. So, married couples should be on guard against the neglect of this form of intimacy in marriage in a manner that is not dissimilar from the believer's vigilance against spiritual drift (Heb 2:1–4). Put positively, the couple should proactively pursue the ongoing cultivation of face-to-face forms of intimacy. The wedding day, after all, should be understood as the "starting line" and not the "finish line" of the couple's pursuits of communion and intimacy.[35]

2) *Side-by-Side*: If the previous dimension of intimacy used the image of the couple facing one another, this dimension is perhaps best illustrated by spouses standing shoulder to shoulder, as they seek to face their varied responsibilities as teammates.

2021): 30-41. Readers will find it interesting, and not all that surprising, that marital sexual intimacy is theologically analogous to the ordinance of communion, as both are embodied expressions of the ongoing pursuit and enjoyment (i.e. communion) of the respective unions to which these signs point.

[31] In his own inimitable style, C.S. Lewis put it this way: "The Christian idea of marriage is based on Christ's words that a man and wife are to be regarded as a single organism. . . . [T]he male and the female, were made to be combined together in pairs, not simply on the sexual level, but totally combined. The monstrosity of sexual intercourse outside marriage is that those who indulge in it are trying to isolate one kind of union (the sexual) from all the other kinds of union which were intended to go along with it and make up the total union. The Christian attitude does not mean that there is anything wrong about sexual pleasure, any more than about the pleasure of eating. It means that you must not isolate that pleasure and try to get it by itself, any more than you ought to try to get the pleasures of taste without swallowing and digesting, by chewing things and spitting them out again." C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 104–105.

[32] Like any heuristic device, this rubric is not exhaustive. The categories are not rigid and there is overlap among them. Nevertheless, we have found it useful to convey the point about pursuing multi-dimensional intimacy in marriage. I'm confident that we picked up this rubric for thinking about marital intimacy from marriage mentors or ministry partners along the way, but I cannot recall who initially shared it with us. However we came by it, I suspect the origins go back to C.S. Lewis' differentiation of face-to-face and side-by-side forms of love in, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), 91, 98–104

[33] To that end, I commend Paul Tripp's, *War of Words: Getting to the Heart of Your Communication Struggles*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2025).

[34] As Gary Thomas has noted, the intense phase of romantic infatuation ceases, in marriage, "to be the main glue that holds a relationship together on a day-to-day basis." Rather, "[f]eelings become 'warm and dependable' more than 'hot and excitable.' God simply did not design our brains to sustain a lifelong infatuation (for some very good reasons)." Gary Thomas, *The Sacred Search* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2013), 29.

[35] Justin Buzzard, *Date Your Wife* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 57.

This category describes the couple's partnership in the "business" of managing a home and family. It would include things like managing the calendar and the budget, fixing the leaky faucet, and raising the kids. It ranges from doing the dishes to changing diapers, helping with math homework, hosting the in-laws, and leading family devotionals.

Clearly, the net on this one is wide. And to be sure, it is a form of intimacy to partner and serve well together. Being good teammates comes with its own experience of joy. However, when this mode of partnership overtakes and swallows up the other expressions, as it is wont to do given its vast scope, that's a significant warning flag that calls for the couple's attention. A good diagnostic check would be for a couple to consider whether they feel like "roommates" or "business associates" rather than spouses. If the sense of being "business associates" has the upper hand, that's an indicator that it's past time to invest in some of the other dimensions of marital communion.

3) *Back-to-Back*: Here, the image is of the couple standing back-to-back with a view to fighting on behalf of the other. This perspective recognizes: (1) that one's spouse does in fact have an enemy, and (2) that one's spouse cannot watch his or her own back. Here, commitments like worshiping together and bearing prayer burdens for one another add up powerfully over time. Indeed, because of sin's deceitfulness, a word like the one given in Hebrews 3:12–13 has fitting application to husbands and wives as well.

The author of Hebrews admonishes, "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb 3:12–13). In this warning, the author exhorts that since sin is seeking to progress daily, so the responses of grace, wisdom, and repentance are called for daily. Congregationally speaking, we need each other to help apply that grace, because while we can readily see the advance of sin in another person's life, we are more easily self-deceived about its advance in our own lives.

Of course, if such encouragements and exhortations are part of the commended countermeasures to sin's deceitfulness congregationally, how much greater is the advantage that spouses have in watching out for and serving one another in similar ways because of how closely their lives intertwine. The couple's partnership in pursuit of the other's sanctification, therefore, necessitates a place for things like loving intercession, confession, and forgiveness. To be sure, intimacy of this kind can be sobering, and it calls for wisdom about how best to communicate, but when done well, it can be like "rocket fuel" to the couple's experience of deep relational connectedness and companionship.

5. PARTNERS IN A SANCTIFYING PILGRIMAGE

To elaborate a bit further on the category of back-to-back intimacy, the goal here is for the couple to function as sanctification partners. Pivotal to the couple's marital union is the role each partner gets to fill in the long-term project of helping one another become their "future glory-selves."[36] And while it is true that the husband and wife will not be the only human influences in one another's sanctification pilgrimage, it is also true that their respective influence will be of a magnitude and kind different from all others. Much could be said here, but for our purposes, I just want to

[36] Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 120–124. Surely this ought to be the priority pursuit in marriage, since it is abundantly clear that Christ unites himself to the church to make her holy (Eph 5:26-27).

make one doctrinal observation and an application to seasons of suffering.

To begin, doctrinally speaking, progressive sanctification is a form of fighting a battle the Lord has already won. It involves a real fight of faith that is undergirded by a secure outcome (Rom 8:30–39, 1 Cor 15:56–58, Phil 2:5–13, Col 2:9–15).[37] Prior to any fighting on our part, justification grants the new legal standing and union with Christ establishes the new identity out of which we begin to live as "new creations" (2 Cor 5:17). Little by little, the process of progressive sanctification conforms us experientially to what is already true of us positionally.[38] And so, this "already / not yet" experience of growth in holiness between justification and glorification helps reinforce that this world is not our home (Phil 3:20–21, Heb 13:14, 1 John 2:15–17). We are instead "sojourners and exiles" (1 Pet 2:11, cf. 1 Pet 1:1). Our salvation is secure (1 Pet 1:17–20), but our growing faith is going somewhere, namely all the way home where our faith shall become sight (1 Cor 13:12, 1 Pet 1:13–16, 2:12, Rev 22:4–5).

Now we want to briefly consider how spouses can encourage one another's perseverance on those occasions when their partner's "sight" becomes clouded by the fog of suffering and grief. Along the pilgrim way, rhythms of grace like partnering in the Word and in prayer (1 Cor 7:5, Eph 5:25–27), warning against sin's deceptions (Eph 4:22, Heb. 3:12–13), and pointing each other to more robust and enduring promises of the gospel (Heb 11:24–26, 2 Pet 1:3–4), will serve and prepare couples well for the "for worse" days that are sure to come. But what about the days when their

partnership is called to endure seasons of substantial suffering, where the "for worse" part of the vow is paid in the extreme? Though that isn't cheery to think about, our discussion of "swearing to one's own hurt" above has prepared us for thinking about the marital commitment to suffer well together.[39]

In addition to the intake of the regular means of grace, suffering well together requires that the couple have a category for events and seasons that are both hard and yet good in the hands of God, which enables a kind of grieving that is compatible with hope (1 Thess 4:13). The greatest instance of this kind is the cross of Christ, whereby the instrument of Christ's execution becomes the instrument of his exaltation and our deliverance from sin (John 12:27–33). But life in a fallen world, ruled

[37] The World War II analogy of fighting between D-Day and V-Day has often been used as a helpful illustration of what it means to fight from the footing of an already-secured outcome.

[38] Clint Arnold deftly demonstrates that the teaching of Ephesians 5:26–27 encompasses both positional and progressive sanctification. Arnold, *Ephesians*, 386-390.

[39] On a related note, we regularly counsel dating and engaged couples to think prayerfully and carefully about whether they can reasonably anticipate being able to partner well together during seasons of suffering. For those who are confident that they cannot, that is as good of a reason as any not to proceed down the path to marriage.

by a good and sovereign God, includes plenty of such experiences (Gen 45:4–8, 50:19–20, Rom 5:3–5, 8:28, James 1:2–4).

Further, the ministry of suffering and grieving well together surely involves an abundance of tender compassion, a listening ear, and patient affirmations of "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief" — expressions of limping faith (Mark 9:24). For all of these forms of care help hold one another up in times of weakness (e.g., Exod 17:11-13). As a further expression of "bearing one another's burdens" (Gal 6:2), it is vital to consider the way a couple's ministry of presence to one another can imperfectly point to the perfect assurance of God's presence.

This ministry of presence is of value because of the way that suffering and grief often give rise to feelings of isolation and even to questioning God's presence in our lives (e.g., Ps 13:1). And questioning God's faithfulness can open the door to the temptation to turn from God and toward various expressions of self-protection instead (e.g., Gen 12:10–13, Matt 26:31, Luke 22:54–62). In the face of these sorts of destabilizing anxieties brought on by suffering and grief, the reassurance that "for better or worse, I will be with you" can offer comfort and encouragement to take the next step of faith. Such comfort speaks, to some extent at least, to the fear of being alone in suffering.[40] But, as we've pointed out, that promise not to leave nor forsake the spouse 'til parted by death, is a shadow of a greater promise for God to be with us (Deut. 31:6, Ps. 23:4, 46:1, Heb. 13:5). And that promise, because of Christ's atonement, cannot even be breached by death itself (Rom 8:38–39, 1 Cor 15:53–57, Rev 21:3–4).

And so because Immanuel, God with us (Matt 1:23), humbled himself to pursue us all the way to the point of death on a cross (Phil 2:5–8), thereby taking on the sentence of separation from God that our sins deserve (Matt 27:45–46, 2 Cor 5:21), those who are in Christ, never actually know the reality of that abandonment. Consequently, despite how we may feel in seasons of suffering, the hope of the Gospel is that we already have all that we truly need (Rom 8:32) and as such, we have, as our greatest hope, a secure treasure that can never be taken away (Matt 10:28). And yet, in our suffering, we sometimes struggle and need help apprehending these truths.

Here, the helping spouse is uniquely positioned to point the struggling spouse to the even greater assurance that God will never leave nor forsake us (Heb 13:5) by means of wisely timed reminders of how God has shown his faithfulness time and again.[41] For, it can be a significant blessing to rehearse both the biblical stories of redemption and the stories of God's faithfulness in our own past — times where we wondered how or if God would come through . . . until he did. God deemed these sorts of remembrances as so essential to persevering faith that he has woven them into the rhythms of his faith family. We see this both in the memorialization of the Passover (Exod 12:24–27) and the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:17–20, 1 Cor 11:23–26). So, it would seem wise for the nuclear family to cultivate practices of sharing the remembrance of God's faithfulness to them specifically as well.

Couples can discern for themselves the best shape of their personal remembrances to go along with participating regularly in the rhythms of gathered worship that call us corporately to remember

[40] While it may seem like restating one's commitment to be there is a form of stating the obvious, it is worth remembering that the "obvious" isn't always obvious to those in the grip of suffering or grief.

[41] Paying attention to timing is an important component of caring well for a sufferer. There are times to talk, and there will be times where the appropriate thing to do will simply be to "weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15).

what the Lord has done and promises to do for us (Heb 10:24–25). The bottom line in suffering and grief is that spouses have a unique role to play in helping when the other's spiritual sight is clouded by grief. When spouses alternately do so, as an expression of suffering well together, God is glorified by their magnification of Christ's ongoing, never-forsaking union with his bride — the church — that secured her, purifies her, and walks her all the way home.

CONCLUSION

When our marriages take their cues from the good design of creation (Gen 1–2), Christ's redeeming love for the church (Eph 5:22–31), and the fulfillment of the meaning of marriage in the new creation (Matt 22:30, Rev 19, 21), they will have enormous resources from which to draw. In this article, after taking stock of the meaning of marriage itself, we saw how the doctrines of justification, reconciliation, union with Christ, and sanctification are all laden with rich application not only to individuals but also to married couples seeking to reflect and draw strength from the Christ-church relationship. To be sure, even reading a "flyover" article like this can leave readers feeling overwhelmed. Having been provided with five key theological emphases, the reader may feel stuck, wondering how to put doctrine into practice. You probably don't even remember all that you just finished reading; don't worry about that. You wouldn't be able to make it all immediately actionable anyway. Instead of fretting over what you can't accomplish right now, ask God to show you one or two concrete steps you can begin taking towards more Christ-centered growth in your marriage.[42] And little by little, if you've found this helpful, come back for more.

[42] To give just two possible examples, you might plan to spend some time meditating on Christ swearing a vow to his own hurt for you, with a view to a specific area where you might lean into keeping the "for worse" part of the vow to the benefit of your spouse. Or, you could identify one of the dimensions of marital intimacy (probably face-to-face or back-to-back) where there is an intimacy deficit and consider how you might pursue making a meaningful investment this week.

ROSARIA BUTTERFIELD

Design and Defiance:

Authentic Femininity

Twenty-seven years ago, I found myself at an awkward dinner party.[1] I was a lesbian professor dining with my Christian neighbors, Pastor Ken Smith and his wife, Floy. I had written an article critical of Christianity, and my neighbors invited me to dinner to discuss our opposing worldviews. That might sound odd, but this was 1997, back when neighbors talked to each other and when leftist activists weren't so fragile as to believe that competing ideas were "toxic."

I had a dog in the race, too. I was researching why evangelical Christians felt called to impose the Bible on everyone around them. Albeit awkward, I trusted this dinner gathering would be good for my research.

I had no idea at the time how very good this awkward dinner gathering would be for my soul.

One meal turned into weekly meals: as I was interviewing Ken and Floy Smith about their beliefs, they were evangelizing me, and the Holy Spirit was working in my heart. After two years of Ken and Floy's Christian love and hospitality, the Holy Spirit troubled my deeply held beliefs to their breaking point. As I examined my own stormy heart, the Holy Spirit compelled me to keep reading the Bible and to start praying to God to make me a godly woman. This process of becoming – becoming a Christian who repents and believes, becoming a member of a church and taking her covenant vows, becoming a heterosexually married wife and mother, becoming a hater of the sin I once loved and growing in what the Bible calls sanctification, has been rigorous. As the Puritans would say, sanctification is true even when it is incomplete.

The grand story of God's creation drew me into its majesty in spite of my protestations. That story begins with God's detailed love over the masterful design of every atom, asteroid, anchovy, apple tree, and ape — a perfect pattern of creative purpose. It includes God's crowning achievement: Adam, man made in His own image; then Adam's lack and Eve's creation, purposed for lack's remedy; and then Satan's dramatic entrance with his subtle temptation and bitter accusation against man and woman made in God's image.

Sinful desires appear small when seen against the expanse of God's creation. I wondered whether these feelings themselves were sin. As I read the creation account, a war broke out between my God-created soul and God Himself. On what grounds could I deny Genesis 1:26-28?

> Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion....So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it...."

God's word cornered me like a mouse in a trap:

- If God is all-powerful, the gender binary is authoritative.
- If God is loving, the creation ordinance is noble and relational: Man "is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man....In the Lord, woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things from God" (1 Corinthians 11:7, 11-12).
- If God is omniscient and our physical bodies are resurrected on the last day, the ontology of bearing the image of

[1] This essay has been adapted from an address given at CrossCon in Louisville, Kentucky, January 2026.

> God as men or women renders male and female as permanent categories. Male or female on earth becomes male or female in the new Jerusalem or Hell.

At weekly dinners with Ken and Floy, they fanned the flames of spiritual war, never apologizing for God's word and design, never justifying my complaints against God, never believing I was too far gone for God's mercy. Evenings overflowed with simple biblical exposition ladled with hearty soup and fresh bread. They told me to read my Bible, pray to God, and find Jesus. And then, one night, they introduced the word "repent" and told me that without repentance, no one can come to Christ.

That was how my neighbors put the hand of this sinner into the Hand of my Savior. I learned that my homosexuality was sin because homosexuality — in both desire and deed — rebels against God's design for men and women. It was then that I started to understand that I was designed for a different purpose, and that no one can win in a war against God's architecture, for He is the Designer of male and female as pattern with purpose.. My lie wasn't a novel penned by my own hand.

At one dinner gathering, Pastor Ken told me that God designs all things according to this principle: what is true determines what is ethical and beautiful. He said he wanted me to know the basics of a biblical worldview. The Bible is the truth, Ken said, and therefore, when society claims an anti-biblical ethic — like gay rights — it's claiming to be more merciful and wise than God. God's biblical truth about men and women is that we are all created by God in His image, with dignity and value. Adam's sin, inherited by all of His posterity, marred God's image in humanity, and the redemption and ransom of Jesus Christ restores our image. God created man and woman according to a pattern of binary opposition for the purpose of marriage, child-bearing, and rearing. Heterosexuality is the pattern of sexuality that God calls true. Biblical truth hit me like a train: my lesbianism may be my lived experience and real, but it is not true, because homosexuality is not part of creation.

Three decades have passed since lesbianism and atheism claimed my heart. But Ken and Floy Smith remained my faithful Christian friends (and parents-in-the-Lord) throughout and until the Lord took them home to glory. When I married my husband, Kent Butterfield, in 2001, Ken Smith walked me down the aisle. When my husband became a church planter and eventually the senior pastor of another church, I followed Floy's advice for being a pastor's wife, including using her bread recipe to bake communion bread.

Here are the key roles and core tasks of a godly woman. Following them faithfully honors God, blesses the world and the church, and puts you at war with the idols of our day, namely feminism and LGBTQ ideology.

THE BIBLICAL ROLE OF A DAUGHTER.

A Christian daughter seeks to learn from her mother and other older women the basics of Christian living and homemaking. She is a single woman who learns to find contentment in singleness and prepares herself to be a godly wife should the Lord provide her with a godly husband.

Exodus 20:12 (the 5th commandment) constitutes a key verse for Christian daughters: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you."

So how do Christian daughters apply this command? Honor your parents. Fathers come in different forms: spiritual fathers include pastors and elders, earthly fathers (by biology or adoption), and God our Father. Daughters honor their spiritual fathers by committing their lives to Jesus and surrendering their will

to Him, being baptized members of our churches, and taking and keeping covenant vows. Daughters honor their earthly fathers by seeking to bring dignity to their father's name. Daughters honor their heavenly Father by praising His name publicly and by suffering for His sake. Daughters honor their mothers by learning to be Christian women, to be disciplined in the means of grace, and to perform domestic chores. Daughters who are new converts and come from unbelieving homes learn from the families in their church.

The core task of a Christian daughter is to be a Christian, growing in godliness and discernment, learning life skills that equip you to live a purposeful life, and learning from your mother and other godly women how to keep a Christian home that is life-giving and hospitable.

THE BIBLICAL ROLE OF A SISTER

The biblical role of a sister in both the family and the church is to guard her own purity and protect her brothers' purity. Yes, his lust is his, but if you are the cause of it, you bear part of the burden of this sin. A key verse for Christian sisters is 1 Peter 3: 3-4: "Do not let your adornment be merely outward — arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel — rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God."

A core task for a sister is modesty. Biblical counselor Martha Peace defines modesty as an inner attitude of the heart, motivated by love for God and by a desire to seek His glory through purity and humility; it often manifests in words, actions, expressions, and clothing. In contrast, immodesty is "an attitude of the heart that expresses itself with inappropriate words, actions, expressions, and/or clothes that are flirtatious, manipulative, revealing, or suggestive of sensuality or pride."[2] Our clothing is an expression of our hearts. Our clothing, biblically speaking, is "designed to cover shame, conceal nakedness, display beauty, shroud sin, demarcate the distinctiveness of men and women, embody humility, profess godliness, symbolize purity, and signify how the Lord drapes the wearer in eternal robes of righteousness."[3] Later in the book, Pastor Brown says, "the meaning of clothing is that God intervenes."[4] After Adam and Eve sinned, God's first act was to cover their shame with clothes. This first act of clothing a naked body is a symbol of salvation — of the blood of Christ covering

[2] Martha Peace and Kent Keller, *Modesty: More than a Change of Clothes* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publication, 2015), 18.
[3] Scott T. Brown, *Beyond Modesty: Tracing the Meaning of Clothing Through the Fabric of Scripture*. Wake Forest, NC: Church & Family Life Press, 2024: 5.
[4] Brown, *Beyond Modesty*, 7.

the sinner in blood-bought righteousness and providing ransom for a debt that we cannot pay.

THE BIBLICAL ROLE OF WIFE

The biblical wife finds her key verse in Genesis 2:23, "Then the man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." A Christian wife is a Christian husband's helpmate. And in a world that opposes Christ, a helpmate is, as Emma Waters writes in her brilliant book, *Lead Like Jael,* a "battlemate."[5] A Christian husband and wife are a powerful team against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

In Peter's first epistle, he challenges husbands with a philosophical observation: "Dwell with [your wife] with understanding, giving honor to the wife as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life" (1 Peter 3:7). He closes his philosophical argument with a warning to husbands. Peter says that husbands who refuse to "give honor to the wife as to the weaker vessel" face the reality that God may not attend to their prayers. Peter puts it this way: "so that your prayers may not be hindered." Paul, in his letter to Timothy, offers a different philosophical argument. Paul returns to the fall of man and says, "Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived fell into transgression" (1 Timothy 2:13-14). Some might want to shout, "Unfair!" But we need to remember that we inherited our sin nature. Original sin refers not to what Adam did but rather what we received from him and the sin nature that we now possess, for which we bear responsibility. The Heidelberg Catechism (Question 10) says that God is "terribly displeased with our inborn [original] as well as our actual sins, and will punish them." The Bible concurs. In the Gospel of John, we read, "this is the condemnation: that the light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light" (John 3:19). In the Garden of Eden and before the fall, God offered a covenant of works (do this and live; do that and die), but Eve preferred Satan's covenant of egalitarianism: eat this and be like God. A good question is this: what ought Adam to have done when his wife started talking with the serpent? Because God had already introduced the death penalty (do this and live; do that and die), Adam had the liberty to kill the serpent, just as we have the responsibility to kill our sin. Instead, Adam did nothing, and sin fractured Adam and Eve's relationship with God and with each other and bequeathed us all with sin. Only Christ can restore a husband and wife and make them a team. The core task for a godly wife is to cultivate love and respect for your husband. That is, we must learn submission to our husbands. Of course, the first core task of a godly wife happens before she gets married: she must marry a godly man!

THE BIBLICAL ROLE OF MOTHER

All mature Christian women are either spiritual or literal mothers, or both. A Christian mother, by physical birth or adoption, loves her children sacrificially and desires their well-being and Christian education. Her creational and nurturing qualities are gifts from God and perfect expressions of how God designs women, and she knows that. Such Christian mothers must look to Psalm 113:9 as a key verse: "[God] gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord!"

A Christian mother moves from youth to maturity in this role. When she is younger, she is childbearing and rear-

[5] Emma Waters, *Lead Like Jael: 7 Timeless Principles for Today's Women of Faith* (Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, 2026).

ing, schooling her children, and balancing the needs of an ever-changing household, learning to submit to her husband as they serve as battlemates in a world that hates Christ and hates children. When she is older, and past her childbearing years, she is a matriarch — a wise, nurturing woman known for her gentle leadership and for her role in preserving tradition. The prophetess Deborah is a matriarch, and the Bible names her a "mother in Israel" (Judges 5:7). Proverbs 31 describes a long list of what it means to grow in being a godly woman and mother: she is wise, discerning, caring, looking out for her household and for the needs of those outside of her house, she works hard and spends her time and resources wisely, she is creative, she plans and prepares for the days ahead, her good works precede her, she makes her husband and family look good, she fears the Lord and not her aging body and the changing seasons of life, and her children — literal and spiritual — rise and call her blessed.

The core task of a mother, whether literal, spiritual, or both, is maturity and humility. To fulfill this godly role, you must repent of pride and ambition and seek for the children under your care to exceed you in grace and godliness. In the Christian life, age is a good and glorious thing. No mature Christian woman should speak of "empty nest syndrome," for this is an admission of the sin of discontent.

Obedience to God's design is the only safe, good, and God-honoring way to live. In a world that despises God, women who obey Him will be targets of the world's wrath. Like the famed Proverbs 31 woman, we who trust the Lord can laugh without fear for whatever the future holds, because she knows the Shepherd: "Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come" (v 25). This is not a mocking laugh, or a cruel, hard-heartedness to the suffering in this lost and dying world. Rather, this is a laugh of confidence, dignity, and grace that models hope in God's providence and joy in being part of God's mission plan.

Rosaria Butterfield is the wife of Kent Butterfield, Senior Pastor of First Reformed Presbyterian Church of Durham (NC), and a mother, grandmother, and author of several books.

JONATHAN MASTER

The Gospel in A Single Word:

Honoring God as Father

There have been significant cultural shifts in American society regarding gender and sexual identity in the last decades.[1] Some awakened to these shifts in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's Obergefell decision; for some, the transgender movement and the attendant pressures it placed on Christian churches and academic institutions were the wake-up call. Committed complementarians, however, understand that radical pressure with respect to a biblical understanding to sex and gender began much earlier. The long march of egalitarianism through our churches and Christian colleges and seminaries began long before 2015 and the political and social pressure that followed shortly thereafter.

Recently, I was speaking with someone who teaches at a well-known evangelical college in America. He told me that there is only a single complementation — one! — in its department of Biblical and Theological Studies. Changes like this do not come overnight. They do not happen as a result of one court decision or even after a few years of social pressure. They are the result of a decades-long shift in evangelical scholarship and publishing. The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood has stood athwart this long

[1] The following is adapted from an address delivered on November 17, 2025 at the CBMW Banquet at the Evangelical Theological Society in Boston, Massachusetts.

march and has served to animate and solidify those holding to traditional biblical teaching.

Complementarians have had our own controversies and conversations over the last fifteen years. We have been engaged in a significant debate both within and outside our movement related to the Doctrine of God and Trinitarian Theology. Most of this has centered upon the Eternal Subordination of the Son (ESS) or Eternal Functional Subordination (EFS) understanding of the trinitarian relations, about which different conclusions have been drawn.

I do not intend to address this debate in any detail. Many have written in illuminating ways on these issues already, and the things that unite complementarians will be the focus of this essay.

We are united on the biblical teaching about human beings as male and female. We are united in our understanding of the particular and complementary roles that God has given to men and women in the home and in the church. We are united against female ordination to the offices of Christ's church. This is an area in which many denominations, including my own, seem to be constantly battling over. We are united against an egalitarian flattening out of distinctions that God our wise Creator has made.

But, while I do not propose revisiting the EFS/ESS debate, I do intend to highlight a sad irony related to the debates about the doctrine of God. While we can all rejoice at the renewed attention within evangelicalism to the doctrine of God and to specific doctrines such as divine simplicity, inseparable operations, and divine incomprehensibility, this renewal of attention and scholarship in Theology Proper has been shockingly slow to address even more significant shifts in the ranks of evangelicalism.

RENAMING GOD

In the midst of greater clarity in some areas, large areas of confusion continue to persist and to fester. Frankly, many who are most zealous to argue against EFS and ESS seem to have failed to consider far more obvious matters concerning the Bible's portrayal of God. I was reminded of this when reading Amy Peeler's chapter, "The Need for Nicene Exegesis," in the recent volume, *On Classical Trinitarianism*, edited by Matthew Barrett.[2] Barrett's book is a robust resource intended for the recovery of not only the classical doctrine of God, but of the specific preconditions and assumptions that lay behind it.

In her chapter, Peeler argues vigorously against EFS on both exegetical and theological grounds, concluding that it sits uneasily with the classical doctrine of God. But we cannot help to note that her work, and the approach to the doctrine of God represented by it, seems diametrically opposed to classical Christian teaching in significant and obvious ways.

Peeler's most notable contribution to the doctrine of God is her 2022 volume, *Women and the Gender of God*.[3] In that book, she attempts to bring together the conclusions of modern gender studies with the doctrine of God — a significant hermeneutical departure from the classical tradition. Her conclusions are also theologically novel when considered against the sweep of Christian theology; but they are all too common among modern evangelical feminist writing on the doctrine of God.

To cite a few examples: In Peeler's discussion of eternal generation — surely

[2] Matthew Barrett, ed., *On Classical Trinitarianism: Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God* (Downer's Grove, IL, IVP, 2024).
[3] Amy Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 2022).

an important facet of classical trinitarianism — she advocates for multivalent ways of describing the Father's generation of the Son. In this respect, she positively cites Jürgen Moltmann in his "radical denial of patriarchal monotheism."[4] It is hard to imagine how this fits with any classical formulations of the generation of the Son. It is equally difficult to conceive of orthodox precommitments regarding metaphysics that encompass the "fruitful possibility" that Jesus Christ could have been intersex, which is among her suggestions.[5]

These are not incidental details. Peeler's theological work has, as one of its aims, undermining a masculine view of God. She writes — in language that is increasingly prominent in evangelical literature — "That God is Parent or Mother, and not only Father, helps to work against the 'phallacy' that God is male."[6] Along the same lines, Peeler affirms Kathryn Tanner's suggestion to use "gender-bending gender imagery" when referring to God. She concludes, "Addressing the personal and eternal divine source as 'Parent' rather than 'Father' may more correctly name the relationship."[7]

GOD AS FATHER

What is at stake in all this renaming of God? What would it mean for our doctrine of God to sideline or disregard the consistent biblical address of God as Father? John Murray called the reality of God's Fatherhood "the apex of grace and privilege."[8] Herman Bavinck goes even further: "'Father' is thus the supreme revelation of God, and since the Father is made known to us by Jesus through the Spirit, the full, abundant revelation of God's name is Trinitarian: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."[9]

[4] Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 100
[5] Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 140.
[6] Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 17.
[7] Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 100-101.
[8] John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 134.
[9] Herman Bavinck *Reformed Dogmatics, vol 2: God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 97.

"If we negotiate with the idea that Father is simply one of the multi-variant ways in which relations could be expressed, then we are tampering with the self-revelation of God in His essence."

The truth is that the term Father speaks first of what God is in Himself. God is by nature Father. He is not called Father merely by analogy to human fathers; rather, it works the other way: human fatherhood is a dim reflection of His perfect archetype. The Apostle Paul writes that every family in heaven and on earth derives its name "from the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph 3:14–15). As F. F. Bruce observed, "All other fatherhood is more or less an imperfect copy of His perfect fatherhood."[10]

This notion of God as Father is essential to the Bible's revelation of who the Triune God is. Gilles Emery explains: "To name someone father is to name him as father of someone; and to apply the name of Son to Christ is to describe him in his relation to his Father."[11] This relational term, Father, cannot be separated or substituted if we are to keep the doctrine of the Trinity intact as it has been revealed to us. If we negotiate with the idea that Father is simply one of the multi-variant ways in which relations could be expressed, then we are tampering with the self-revelation of God in His essence. He is triune. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But the Scriptures also use the language of God as Father to describe His relationship to His creation. In Malachi 2:10, the prophet declares: "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?" Paul echoes this truth in Acts 17:28. Even more poignantly, this is the language that is given to us to describe God's relationship to His redeemed people. We are to refer to God in prayer as, "Our Father" (Matt 6:9); and we do so knowing that, "your Father, who sees in secret will reward you" (Matt 6:6).

THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD AND ADOPTION

After His resurrection, Jesus combines the truth about His own relations with the relationship between His people and their God: "I am ascending to my Father and your Father…" (John 20:17a). This truth is expressed powerfully in the Christian doctrine of adoption, all of which is unintelligible without the notion of God as Father. Francis Lyle, in *Slaves, Citizens, and Sons,* writes:

> The profound truth of Roman adoption was that the adoptee was taken out of his previous state and placed in a new relationship of son with his new father. All his old debts were instantly cancelled, and, in effect, began a new life with the family. On the one hand, the new father owned all the new adoptee's property and controlled his personal relationships

[10] F.F. Bruce, "Name," in the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology,* ed Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 2:655.
[11] Gilles Emory, *The Trinity: An Introduction to the Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God* (Washington, CUA Press, 2019), 85.

> and had his rights of discipline, but on the other hand he was liable for the actions of the adoptee and each of the other reciprocal duties of the relationship.[12]

Galatians 4:1–7 provides the key text for understanding the transition from slavery to sonship. Under the law, God's people were like children under guardians — heirs in title but not yet in experience. Yet they are adopted as sons of a Father. The Spirit of adoption as sons causes us to cry out, "'Abba! Father!'" (Rom 8:15). The same Spirit who unites us to Christ teaches us to cry out confidently to God as Father. To know God as Father and ourselves as His children explains everything — our salvation, our worship, our obedience, our hope.

Historically, this truth of our adoption was not always given prominent attention, although the Fatherhood of God was never in question. Sinclair Ferguson notes that the medieval church paid little attention to the Christian life as sonship. It was Calvin and the later Reformed tradition which restored the biblical emphasis. Ferguson writes, "It was left to the Reformed theological tradition, following the lead of Calvin, to recover this biblical emphasis."[13]

The later Reformed tradition certainly expanded upon it. As Johnson reminds us, William Ames devoted 27 points to adoption in *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity*. John Owen treated it in *Communion with God*, and even asserted that, "This is what Christ came to reveal — God as Father." He also cited this revelation as leading to "the authoritative translation of a believer, by Jesus Christ, from the family of the world and Satan into the family of God, with all the privileges and advantages of that family."[14]

The Westminster Confession of Faith also devotes a chapter to this glorious truth. In adoption, believers "enjoy the liberties and privileges of children of God, having his name put upon them, receive the Spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry 'Abba, Father, are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by him, as by a father…"[15] None of this is possible apart from the central reality of the Fatherhood of God.

Because God is the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, he gives us His name and we are gradually transformed into His likeness. First John 3:1 reminds us, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are… Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure" (1 John 3:1a, 2-3). As Wilhelmus à Brakel writes, "All that He is, He is for His children."[16]

Because we are sons of a Father, we are also heirs (Gal 4:7). We are joint heirs with the Son who is the "heir of all things" (Rom 8:17; Heb 1:2). Knowing God as Father shapes every part of the Christian life. It gives us identity now

[12] Francis Lyell, *Slaves, Citizens, Sons: Legal Metaphors in the Epistles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 83.
[13] Sinclair B. Ferguson, "The Reformed Doctrine of Sonship," in *Pulpit and People: Essays in Honour of William Still on His 75th Birthday*, ed. Nisel M. de S. Cameron and Sinclair B. Ferguson (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1986), 82. Quoted from Terry L. Johnson, *The Excellencies of God: Exploring and Enjoying His Attributes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2022), 159–160.
[14] Terry L. Johnson, *The Excellencies of God: Exploring and Enjoying His Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2022), 160.
[15] *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter XII.
[16] Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books), 2:417.

and hope for eternity. It cannot be separated from who our Triune God is in Himself, or who He is in relation to His sons.

THE GOSPEL AND THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

To call God "Father" is to confess the whole gospel in a single word. God's fatherhood is not merely one feature of His character — it is who He is as the Triune Creator and Redeemer. It is the foundation of His relationship with His people.

To live, therefore, as children of our Father means to rest securely in His love. It means endeavoring to reflect His character in all aspects of life. As His sons, our whole life is to be an expression of our belonging to him and an outworking of His paternal care. Our obedience, our suffering, our prayer, and our rejoicing is an expression of our belonging to Him. Knowing God as Father is thus the most comprehensive and highest knowledge available to human creatures. It is the blessing of redemption; it provides the essential grammar of sanctification; and it is the source of our assurance of eternal life.

Conversely, to treat this notion of God as Father lightly, or to consider it merely one of the equally significant multi-variant expressions of who God is, is not merely to abandon one small detail of biblical revelation. It is to depart from the biblical revelation of who God is in Himself. It is to lose one of the principal ways in which our union with Christ in salvation is articulated in the gospel.

This must be the first priority when clarifying our doctrine of God. As our Mediator, the only begotten Son of God receives glory from His Father so we are made sons of our Father in heaven — partakers of the glory He has as our eternal Father of Lights. We are transformed from one degree of glory to another as we behold the Father in the face of the Son. May we never obscure or fail to maintain this glorious truth.

Jonathan Master is President of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

LOUIS MARKOS

Why We Need a Proper Educational Anthropology

When a group of Pharisees, hoping to trap Jesus into incriminating himself, ask him whether a marriage can be lawfully dissolved, Jesus refuses to take the bait. Rather than haggle with them over the legality or illegality of their first-century version of no-fault divorce, Jesus takes them back to Genesis 1–2, which establishes the biblical-anthropological foundation for the sexual binary on which marriage rests. "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 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'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matt 19:4–6; ESV).

I apologize for using such a jargon-sounding phrase — "the biblical-anthropological foundation for the sexual binary" — but no other phrase will do. Had Jesus allowed himself to be distracted by emotional anecdotes about unhappy husbands or wives or political debates over freedom and autonomy or even historical appeals to what was allowed in the past, he would have ceded to his opponents the core of the issue. The Pharisees' question cannot be properly addressed until the true nature of marriage is determined, but the true nature of marriage cannot be determined until the true nature of the partners within the marriage can be determined.

Enter anthropology: the "study of man." While the word anthropology conjures for many images of primitive tribes and strange rituals, its deeper concern is (or at least should be) to determine who we are, how we are to function, and what our purpose is. Read anthropologically, Genesis 1:27 teaches that we human

beings do not merely express ourselves as male and female; we *are* male and female. We were created as a complementary binary, and as such, Genesis 2:24 makes clear, we were intended from the beginning for union into a life-long, one-flesh covenant.

By grounding his answer in a firm biblical anthropology, Jesus is able to answer the Pharisees' second question, with its seemingly "traditional" appeal to historical precedent: "They said to him, 'Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?' He said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery'" (Matt 19:7–9).

Notice that the exception Jesus allows flows directly out of the anthropological nature of man and marriage. If marriage marks a one-flesh union of two people who exist as a sexual binary, then if one of those two has sex with someone else (becomes one-flesh with them), the original one-flesh union cannot help but be ruptured. In any case, no legitimate debate about marriage and divorce can be had until the debaters can agree that marriage is a one-flesh union entered into by two members of a sexual binary. One of the reasons marriage today is in such a crisis, I would argue, is that we have lost track of the biblical-anthropological foundation for the sexual binary that is itself the foundation for marriage.

DIGNITY AND DEPRAVITY

But marriage is not the only institution that is facing a crisis because society has forgotten what it is and who it is for. Education is in an equal state of crisis, for society has equally forgotten what it is and who it is for. We cannot understand the true nature of education until we cease willfully blinding ourselves to the true nature of the students we are responsible for educating. As with marriage and the sexes, the answer lies in the opening chapters of the Bible. According to Genesis 1–3, our students, like ourselves, are good and noble creatures made in the image of God (*imago Dei*) but fallen into sin and depravity. Once that is understood and accepted, it becomes clear that many of the pedagogical initiatives of the last century-and-a-half have gone awry.

First, if each of our students bears the *imago Dei*, then each possesses inherent worth and dignity. Schools that indoctrinate students into progressive ideologies do not treat them as ends-in-themselves but as means to the achieving of societal goals to which neither the student nor his parents have agreed. Some of those societal goals may be good and even "Christian" — hygiene, anti-smoking, anti-drinking, tolerance, community service — but they nevertheless represent a desire to shape students in accordance with whatever ideology is fashionable at the moment. Over time, those ideologies become increasingly unmoored from anything traditional or even natural and descend into outright social engineering: safe-sex, feminism, environmentalism, gay rights, multiculturalism, equity, identity politics, transgenderism, and so forth.

Most of the agendas I just listed hail from the political left, but the desire to use, herd, and manipulate students for man-made ends appears on the right as well. Utilitarian educators who privilege skills over wisdom, classroom management over character development, vocation over formation end up regulating rather than educating, training a workforce rather than nurturing virtuous, morally self-regulating citizens. The moment we forget students have intrinsic value apart from their functionality, we will treat them as tools for achieving our own

dreams of the future. To borrow a metaphor from C. S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*, we will prepare our little chicks, not as the mother hen does to fly, but as the poultry farm does for the table.

The only sure stay against utopian social engineering on the left and utilitarian regimentation on the right is the *imago Dei*. Only by constantly reminding ourselves that each child, to borrow a phrase from Victorian educator Charlotte Mason, is born a person will we have the necessary foundation and motivation to stop managing and start teaching, stop indoctrinating and start enculturating, stop trying to remake the next generation and start entrusting them with the traditions that have preserved our own humanity and that of our ancestors.

The only way to break the grip of DEI is to recover the *imago DEI*.

But that recovery alone is not enough. If we champion human value but forget human depravity, we will succumb to the destructive power of the self-esteem movement. Contrary to a century of progressive educational reforms, the proper goal of education is not to teach young people to think for themselves. As fallen creatures who stand in a state of rebellion against their Creator, students who are left alone "to define [their] own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life" — to use the satanic language of Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey (1992) — will make a shambles of themselves and their societies. The true goal of education is not to teach students to think for themselves, but to teach them to think rightly.

Physical, emotional, spiritual, moral, and intellectual limits are necessary if schools are to address, moderate, and hopefully lessen the full effects of the Fall. There must be rules, and those rules must be enforced, but a school that knows how to hold in creative tension our dignity and our depravity will do so by instilling an ethical center and a moral compass within its students. This is best accomplished by reading, meditating on, and wrestling with the Great Books that have been passed down to us from the past, the preservation and propagation of which marks one of the chief responsibilities of any educational system grounded in a proper biblical anthropology.

Authority, tradition, virtue, wisdom, duty:

all come together in a vigorous study of the Great Books — what Matthew Arnold dubbed the best that has been thought and known in the world — and all play a key function in building the boundaries that stop individuals and societies from falling prey to their dark, self-destructive instincts and passions. Educators must not fan the flames of Original Sin in their students by encouraging them to abandon the social, ethical, aesthetic, and sexual "inhibitions" of their parents, churches, and communities in favor of expressive-autonomous individualism. That way lies cultural death.

MALE AND FEMALE

And one more thing, something that would not need to be said had our society not unmoored itself from the biblical-anthropological foundation of the sexual binary. When educators forget that God made us male and female, they convince themselves that boys and girls can and should be educated in the exact same manner. As Christina Hoff Summers (*The War Against Boys*) and Leonard Sax (*Boys Adrift*) have documented, the attempt by school systems to repress the natural physicality and aggressiveness of boys, even to the point of labelling them difficult students and putting them on drugs, has caused American boys to lose their way and fall behind.

We are not androgynous souls trapped inside of male or female bodies. Our bodies as well as our souls are masculine or feminine and will continue to be so in the resurrection. Our students are neither animated bags of meat nor interchangeable cogs in a societal machine. They are full human beings, made male or female in the image of God, but fallen and in need of guidance, grounding, and guardrails.

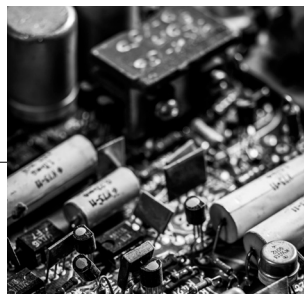
As our anthropology shapes our view of marriage and divorce, so does it shape how and why we educate the next generation. For the sake of our future, we can no longer afford to cling to a materialistic, anti-biblical anthropology of ourselves and our children that robs them of their glorious potential and their desperate need for pedagogical fences.

Louis Markos, Professor in English and Scholar in Residence at Houston Christian University, holds the Robert H. Ray Chair in Humanities; his 30 books include The Myth Made Fact: Reading Greek and Roman Mythology through Christian Eyes, From Achilles to Christ, From Plato to Christ, *and* From Aristotle to Christ. *He discusses educational anthropology at length in the* Introduction to his Passing the Torch: An Apology for Classical Christian Education.

DOUG PONDER

Of Machines and Men:

AI and the Future of Humanity



OF MACHINES AND MEN: AI AND THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY

"Once, men turned their thinking over to machines in the hope that this would set them free. But that only permitted other men with machines to enslave them."[1]

Thus spoke the Reverend Mother in Frank Herbert's classic novel, *Dune*. In response to her words another character replied, "Thou shalt not make a machine in the likeness of a man's mind."[2] In Herbert's fictional world that sacred law was handed down as a way to ensure that machines could never again enslave humanity. The problem for you and I is that such a device has already been created, and like Pandora's box,[3] there is no going back. AI is here to stay, whether we like it or not.

That means we need to think more carefully about what AI is and isn't, what its limits and dangers are, and what its potential uses may be. Christians ought to be leading the charge here, but if what I have witnessed is any indication of the general state of the church on this front, then we have a lot of catching up to do.

A TECHNICAL LOOK AT TECHNOLOGY

We cannot think clearly about AI until we think clearly about all technology in general. In the beginning, the Lord commissioned humanity with a cultural mandate, exhorting us to "fill the earth *and subdue it*" (Gen 1:28).[4] This commission is a summons to use the raw materials of God's world to fashion devices capable of, say, grinding wheat, cultivating vineyards, and pressing olives. Without the technological developments that made these possible, Israel could not have made grain offerings (Lev 2:1), drink offerings (Exod 29:40), or oils for anointing (Exod 25:6; 29:7). Think also of houses, wells, and other necessities of life (Deut 6:11), or other blessings like hospitals, cups of coffee, even cups themselves. The Lord is not against technology in the abstract. Technological development was his idea.

The story of tech takes an interesting turn in Genesis 4, however, where Moses records that Cain and his descendants were the first to build cities (Gen 4:17), the first to domesticate animals (Gen 4:20), the first to craft musical instruments (Gen 4:21), and the first to fashion implements of bronze and iron from the metals of the earth (Gen 4:22). Perhaps the latter were mostly used for farming, but Lamech seems to have had more violent uses in mind, too (Gen 4:22–24).

Biblical theologian James Jordan calls this the "Enoch factor," by which he means that pagans often beat God's people to the punch when it comes to technological innovation.[5] The principle continues with the builders of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11, who were (so far as we know) the first to use bricks and mortar in construction (Gen 11:3). Similarly, the Egyptians perfected the chariot's use in warfare, giving them a significant tactical advantage that lasted for many centuries (Exod 14:23; cf. Josh 17:16; Ps 20:17).

Perhaps the only substantive exceptions to the "Enoch factor" can be found during the height of Christendom, when so much of Europe shared a basically Christian view of the world. But we are not in Christendom anymore, Toto. Ours is more like the

[1] Frank Herbert, *Dune* (1965; repr., Ace Books, 2010), 17.
[2] Ibid., 12.
[3] In Hesiod's original version, it was actually a jar—a *pithos* in Greek—but I will not permit a technical detail to ruin a common metaphor.
[4] The Hebrew word translated "subdue" (כָּבַשׁ) elsewhere refers to conquering (Num 32:22, 29; Josh 18:1; 2 Sam 8:11) or bringing into submission (2 Chron 28:10; Neh 9:5; Jer 34:11), so this term is clearly not referring to the ministry of fruit-picking (cf. Gen 2:16).
[5] See James Jordan, "The Enoch Factor," May 25, 1994, *Theopolis*, https://theopolisinstitute.com/the-enoch-factor/.

world of Genesis 4 and Genesis 11, where, technologically speaking, the pagans get there first. They do so, of course, because they are exclusively earthly-minded. They are singularly focused on the here and now, knowing nothing of God and his eternal purposes (cf. 2 Cor 4:18; Col 3:2; 1 John 2:15, 17).[6]

This does not mean that everything made by the earthly-minded is bad. Recall the cities, tents, livestock, musical instruments, and implements of metal from Genesis 4. Each of these finds a place in the tabernacle (Exod 26:7, 12; 29:18; 30:17–21; Ps 43:4), as God's people looked forward to the city with eternal foundations (Heb 11:10; Rev 21:14). This means that while pagans may be the first to make many things, they do not know what all things are ultimately for. They did not raise livestock for the Day of Atonement (Lev 16–17). They did not play their instruments for the glory of the Lord (Neh 12:27). They did not use bronze and iron to decorate God's house but to decorate Goliath (1 Sam 17:5–7).

It is instructive, therefore, that God tells his people to despoil their Egyptian masters (Exod 3:22) and makes it possible for them to do so (Exod 12:36). Over the centuries, many theologians have advocated a similar approach to the things of the world.[7] But while "plundering the Egyptians" is good in theory, we are fools if we forget the rest of the story. For we know what Israel did with that formerly-Egyptian gold in Exodus 32, and a similar danger faces us today. The vital task set before every generation is to learn how to plunder earthly-minded "Egyptians" without being corrupted ourselves, so that we do not turn their "gold" into a golden calf of self-destruction.

Here some have invoked the categories of "receiving," "redeeming," and "rejecting" as a framework for sifting our approach to worldly inventions.[8] It is said that some things can be accepted as they are, without alternation; other things may be modified, redeeming them for godly purposes; still other things must be rejected outright, having no rightful use whatsoever.

These categories may be a good starting point, but they do not go nearly far enough. We need a comprehensive system of thought that shows us not only what can be received, rejected, or redeemed, but one which also helps us to grasp *when* and *where* and *why* and *how* and *who* may do so.[9] To that end, here are three biblical principles that can help us plunder the Egyptians without unintentionally plundering the glory of God and the good (i.e., *bene esse*) of humanity.

HOW TO SURVIVE THE AGE OF AI WITHOUT LOSING YOUR SOUL

1. We should view technology soberly. Paul writes, "Everyone among you must

[6] I hasten to add that this does *not* mean Christians should care nothing for the things of earth. Ever present is the specter of being "so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good." Yet, as C. S. Lewis rightly observed, "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next." Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr., HarperCollins, 2001), 134.

[7] For example, Origen writes, "Perhaps something of this kind is shadowed forth in what is written in Exodus from the mouth of God… in order that, by spoiling the Egyptians, they might have material for the preparation of the things which pertained to the service of God." See Origen, "A Letter from Origen to Gregory," §§1–2, in *The Writings of Origen*, trans. Frederick Crombie, vol. 1 (T. & T. Clark, 1869), 388–390. Augustine speaks similarly in *On Christian Doctrine* II.40–41, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff (1887; repr., Hendrickson, 1995), 554–555.

[8] See Mark Driscoll, "The Church and the Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World," in *The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World*, eds. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Crossway, 2007), 145–147.

[9] For example, iron can be used to make swords or plowshares, spears or pruning hooks. And though Isaiah 2:4 says that such weapons of war will one day be refashioned as farming tools, Joel 3:10 speaks of another time when farming tools will be refashioned as weapons of war. Besides this, neither farming nor fighting is *categorically* wrong. The former is uncontroversial, but there would have been no stopping the Canaanites and no stopping Hitler without some kind of battle. Perhaps this is why Ecclesiastes 3:8 says there is a time for peace and a time for war under the sun. But again, the questions are: When? and Where? and Why? and How? and Who? This is how we should think about all technology.

"For all technology — even the most basic tool you can think of — changes how people interact with God's world such that our way of living is changed in the process."

not think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but should think with sober judgment" (Rom 12:3). Though the apostle was speaking with regard to sober judgment about ourselves, Paul writes this immediately after exhorting us not to be conformed to this world (Rom 12:2). The proximity is important. The world entices us to see things wrongly.[10] When it comes to technology, Christians have been duped into thinking that virtually all tech is neutral, and therefore able to be "received" or at least "redeemed" without much difficulty.

Yet it is profoundly naïve to think in this way, for technology is never entirely neutral. That idea is a myth, right up there with the myth of progress.[11] To be sure, technology may be *morally* neutral, in the sense that it does not sin by itself,[12] but technology is never *practically* neutral, in the sense that tools always change the way one interfaces with God's world. This is because technological developments not only enable man to do things, they also do things to man. For all technology — even the most basic tool you can think of — changes how people interact with God's world such that our way of living is changed in the process.

Examples abound,[13] but simply consider how search engines and AI platforms affect us.

Now examine search engines and AI platforms. Numerous scientific studies have shown that these inventions atrophy our ability to recall information,[14] which still matters in the year of our Lord 2026. Google and ChatGPT may be able to find a Bible verse in seconds, but that will not profit a man if he has never hidden God's Word in his heart (Psa 119:11). Again, the point is not that these technologies are evil; the point is that they are not neutral in a practical sense. All technology affects us, sometimes in ways we may not be

[10] By "the world" I mean what Richard Lovelace described as "the total system of corporate flesh operating on earth under Satanic control, with all its incentives of reward and restraint of loss, its characteristic patterns of behavior, its anti-Christian structures, methods, goals and ideologies." Richard F. Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (InterVarsity, 1979), 93.

[11] By "myth of progress" I am referring not to the eschaton, when Christ "make[s] all things new" (Rev 21:5) but to the Hegelian notion that history is linear, not cyclical, and that it inevitably progresses toward perfection.

[12] As the modern sage would sayeth, "Guns don't kill people; people kill people."

[13] When nail guns were invented, framing houses became cheaper and quicker. At the same time, the carpenter's forearms also became weaker and his aim a little less careful. (To hammer a nail in the wrong place is a waste of time, but to shoot one in the wrong place can be mended in less than a second.) Or consider how cars and machines, which have improved our lives in many ways, have also made us more sedentary. This was not their intended purpose, but it has proven to be an intractable consequence. As a result, we have to hit the gym to recover the strength and endurance that once came naturally to every man as he simply lived his life.

[14] See Sparrow, Betsy, Jenny Liu, and Daniel M. Wegner, "Google Effects on Memory: Cognitive Consequences of Having Information at Our Fingertips," *Science* 333, no. 6043 (August 5, 2011): 776–778. See also Megan O. Kelly and Evan F. Risko**,** "Study Effort and the Memory Cost of External Store Availability." *Cognition* 228, no. 105228 (November 2022). Other studies also show that in addition to reducing our recall, these technologies increase our rate of "false recall," meaning that we not only fail to remember but misremember as well. See Xinyi Lu, Megan O. Kelly, and Evan F. Risko**,** "Offloading Information to an External Store Increases False Recall." *Cognition* 205, no. 104428 (December 2020) and Joyce S. Park, Megan O. Kelly, Mary B. Hargis, and Evan F. Risko, "The Effect of External Store Reliance on Actual and Predicted Value-Directed Remembering," *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 29 (2022): 1367–1376.

aware of, but we are still affected.

So, then, let us do away with facile declarations that "technology is neutral." Far better to say with the late Neil Postman, "Every technology is both a burden and a blessing; not either-or, but this-and-that."[15] This is the way to sober-mindedness. In practical terms, Christians should stop speaking of technological *advancements* and speak instead of technological *developments,* for with every new potential blessing comes a new potential burden, too. Such an outlook is the starting point for clearheaded thinking about tech and tools, enabling each of us to do what we can to assess and account for life-altering changes that will prove to be some mixture of good and bad in the final analysis.

2. We should adopt new technology cautiously.

In his masterful preface to Athanasius's *On the Incarnation of the Word*, C. S. Lewis points out the danger of reading mainly (or worse, only) new books instead of a diet of mostly old ones.[16] New books are still on trial, Lewis reminds us. Their authors live in the same age that we do, which means they possess the same blind spots that we have.

In a similar way, it is good to remember that new tech is still on trial. Its dangers are rarely, if ever, known right away. Who in 1983 could have foreseen that the internet would be used to mass produce pornography? Who in 2004 foresaw that Facebook would cave to Democratic pressure to censor scientific data and restrict political speech through complex algorithms?[17] Who in 2007 could have foreseen what the smart phone would do to humanity, turning us into mindless addicts who tap and click and swipe an average of 2,617 times per day,[18] while dramatically increasing the rates of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and suicide among teenagers?[19]

[15] Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 4–5.
[16] See C. S. Lewis, "Preface to *On the Incarnation*," *On the Incarnation*, by Saint Athanasius, trans. John Behr, Popular Patristics Series 44 (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2012), 9–16.
[17] Lara Korte, "Zuckerberg Says He Regrets Caving to White House Pressure on Content," *Politico*, August 26, 2024, https://www.politico.com/news/2024/08/26/zuckerberg-meta-white-house-pressure-00176399.
[18] Julian Naftfulin, "Here's How Many Times We Touch Our Phones Every Day," *Business Insider*, July 13, 2016, https://www.businessinsider.com/dscout-research-people-touch-cell-phones-2617-times-a-day-2016-7. This article reports the findings of a study by the research group Dsout. The full study can be found here: https://pages.dscout.com/hubfs/downloads/dscout_mobile_touches_study_2016.pdf.
[19] See Elroy Boers et al., "Association of Screen Time and Depression in Adolescence," *JAMA Pediatrics* 173, no. 9 (September 1,

It took time to discover these dangers, but they were present from the start. The same is true for all technological developments. This is why we must adopt new technologies with great caution, and that goes for the dangers of AI, some of which are still unknown. Yet this much we do know: AI will be disruptive to many industries and thousands of jobs that will soon become obsolete when the work formerly carried out by humans (with families to feed) is replaced by a disembodied machine. Even the coders who design AI are not safe, as AI platforms are already capable of debugging and updating code in ways that far exceed what humans are capable of.

And the truth is, nobody knows where all this is headed. I certainly don't. But I do know that a poll in Silicon Valley found that nearly 50 percent of the people who are making AI believe there is a better than 10 percent chance that it will destroy life as we know it.[20] And even if that dismal outlook does not come to pass, who knows what other ways AI may harm the lives and souls of people who eagerly adopt it without taking the time to consider its potential dangers? The capacity to create credible videos of content purporting to be real has already reached a point such that my wife routinely asks me, "Is this real?" Even if a *Terminator*-style Skynet never destroys the world, the coming epistemological crisis will be bad enough.

Hence Postman's previous point that all tech is both a burden and a blessing. Every new tool introduces some sort of magnification of our capacities that also comes with some sort of diminishment of another capacity. Some are amplified, but others are eclipsed, and both factors — the potential amplification and the potential diminishment — are rarely (if ever) perceived at the moment of creation or adoption. But we can make educated guesses based on patterns and trends we have already observed.

At a minimum, I expect that AI will do to our minds what search engines have done to our memories. Those who "offload" their thinking to machines — @Grok, is this true? — will slowly, but inexorably, atrophy their mental faculties. The same goes for those who make use of AI to help them write. Writing is hard. It forces us to see the gap between what we *think* we know and what we *actually* know at a depth sufficient to communicate our thoughts to others. That is why Francis Bacon said, "Reading maketh a full man; conference [maketh] a ready man; and *writing [maketh] an exact man*."[21]

Those who use AI to assist them in their writing seek a shortcut to fluency without formation, to clarity without struggle, and to mastery without apprenticeship. And it does not help anyone to pretend that AI is a viable replacement for human mentors in this regard (Luke 6:40). For when two (or more) people collaborate in brainstorming or even writing (e.g., 2 Cor 1:1; Rom 16:22; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1), all are edified in the process. AI removes this mutual edification.

We do well, then, to heed the wisdom of God, who says, "Desire without knowledge is not good, and whoever makes haste with his feet misses his way" (Prov 19:2). We must therefore adopt new

2019): 853–859 and Samia B. Elhai, Jason C. Levine, Robert D. Dvorak, and Brian J. Hall, "Problematic Smartphone Use: A Conceptual Overview and Systematic Review of Relations with Anxiety and Depression Psychopathology," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 12, no. 669042 (2021). See also Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin Press, 2024).

[20] See Katja Grace et al., "Thousands of AI Authors on the Future of AI," *Journal of Artificial Intelligence Research* 84 (2025) and Matthew Loh, "AI Researchers Say There's a Chance the Technology Could Lead to Human Extinction," *Business Insider*, January 2024, https://www.businessinsider.com/ai-researchers-chance-tech-making-humans-extinct-2024-1.

[21] Francis Bacon, "Of Studies," in *The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral*, ed. Michael Kiernan (Clarendon Press, 1985), 152, emphasis mine.

tech cautiously, even slowly, not only in our lives, but especially in the church.[22] For new tech is still on trial, as all new things are. Yet those who hasten to use such things, without careful evaluation and sober reflection, will find that their good intentions were no bulwark against bad outcomes.

3. We must use tech virtuously.

Jesus says the greatest aim in life is to honor God, and the second greatest aim is, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:37–39). This means that even if a man were to view tech soberly and adopt it cautiously, he will not benefit from this approach unless he uses tech virtuously, as a part of Spirit-filled new humanity, who knows both what is good and what people are for.

Speaking with relevance to this kind of knowledge, the author of Hebrews says, "Solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil" (Heb 5:14). This entails that some actions are easy to recognize as morally wrong (e.g., Gal 5:19ff), while others take a great level of discernment, one that can only be acquired through careful study of God's Word and "constant practice" of what it teaches (Phil 4:9; 1 Tim 4:15).

If, for example, a pastor were to use AI to write portions of his sermon — which I suspect is a not-so-hypothetical scenario — such a man knows that he has taken ideas and words that were not his own and presented them as if they were. This is a violation of the eighth and ninth commandments.[23] But also, the sort of man who does this is coveting something (Exod 20:17), perhaps the appearance of intelligence, wisdom, or godliness (2 Tim 3:15) that exceeds his actual capacities. And he covets to such a degree that he has made an idol of his desire (Exod 20:5; Col 3:5), which means he doesn't "have no other gods" before the Lord (Exod 20:3). And if he does all this as a Christian, he breaks the third commandment as well (Exod 20:7), bearing the name of God with his lips while denying the ways of God with his life (Isa 29:13; cf. Rom 2:24).

Those are the *easy* sins to recognize. The harder cases involve remembering what people are for. We are not machines. God made us with limitations. This means a computer will always be able to do some tasks much better than we can, but the Lord was not ignorant of this fact when he made us in a fearful and wonderful fashion (Ps 139:14). Apparently, then, God wanted us to have limitations. He knows our frame (Ps 103:14), but *we* need to remember it as well, so that we might learn to depend on him in all things, as those who believe that Jesus really meant it when he said, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Yet the Lord also made us with unique capacities, not just limitations, which means humans can do some things that AI never could. We feel pain (2 Cor 4:17). We suffer loss (Phil 3:8). We know the grief of sin (Jas 4:8–9) and the joy of forgiveness (Ps 32:1). AI knows

[22] Consider, for example, the trend of churches producing "virtual services" online, which seems good to many. It has been pitched as a way to reach the lost, who perhaps would never darken the door of a church, or maybe it would be a way to get the gospel back into the lives of the de-churched, who stopped coming to services. But in the post-COVID years of 2023, the number of Americans who attend church in person monthly (16%) had fallen to nearly the same percentage of persons who only watch religious services online (12%). The introduction of "online services" has contributed to millions now viewing the church as a spectator event, a show they can tune in to — or out of — on their terms. Thus, in our haste to get the gospel to the world, we inadvertently incentivized people to ignore the life-giving needs that only the church can provide. For people are not just brains on a stick; they are bodies as well as souls; they need more than words broadcast over airwaves. They need the bread and wine of communion. They need the hug of a friend. And they need to witness the life of the church as it embodies the gospel in flesh and blood.

[23] I.e., "You shall not steal" (Exod 20:15), and, "You shall not bear false witness" (Exod 20:16; cf. Eph 4:25). What is more, Leviticus 19:11 addresses these together, suggesting that they often go hand-in-hand: "You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to another."

nothing of these realities. Thus, AI may prove to be a helpful research tool in the hands of a virtuous pastor,[24] but AI can never write *embodied* sermons or give experiential counsel to sinners. For speaking the truth in love (Eph 4:15) is not just a transfer of information; it is the overflow of a heart that is walking with God our Savior through the highs and lows of life (Luke 6:45).[25]

CONCLUSION

On a scale from one to five, with one being a total doomer about AI and five being a naïve enthusiast of the same, put me down as a pessimistic two.[26] That is to say, I expect more harm than good will come from AI in the long run. I would love to be wrong about this, of course, but with history and the iron law of human nature on my side, I suspect I will not be far off the mark.

Even so, as I said at the start, AI is here to stay whether we like it or not. And though I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, I do not think AI will not be the last piece of world-changing technology (unless the doomers are right about its world-

[24] Even using AI as a research tool comes with needed cautions, however. It is well known that current iterations of AI have a tendency to "hallucinate," that is, to erroneously provide incorrect answers to the user's questions. Having experimented with AI to search for particular quotes, I have found that it frequently "hallucinates" by paraphrasing, summarizing, or simply repeating the sort of sloppy attribution one finds all over the internet, whose denizens apparently believe that C. S. Lewis and G. K. Chesterton wrote everything. In one instance, a top AI platform with a paid service subscription (the best versions are not free) repeatedly "hallucinated" a quote by forming a pastiche of several half-quotes and paraphrases from multiple sources. It took me the better part of an hour to track down the original author and the correct location, which I was only able to confirm by double-checking with a hard copy of Augustine's text in my possession. How many people are this rigorous with fact-checking AI? Most, it would seem, already treat AI as a near infallible guide to information.

[25] To be sure, there are other potentially helpful uses for AI. Those without any coding knowledge might be able to use it to design a website that blesses many people. Perhaps it will find a cure for cancer. Already AI-enabled robotic "weeders" are bringing an unparalleled level of precision to removing weeds that diminish crop yields. Not only does this technology increase our ability to feed the world, it also may reduce the need for chemical herbicides with side effects that can be harmful to some people. See Lirong Xiang, "Artificial Intelligence (AI)-enabled Robotic Weeders in Precision Agriculture," *NC State Extension*, October 17, 2024, https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/artificial-intelligence-ai-enabled-robotic-weeders-in-precision-agriculture. The blessings are real, and we should thank God for those (1 Tim 4:4). But the burdens are real, too, and we forget these to our own peril.

[26] For the list-loving readers, here is the full scale: 1 = Doomers, 2 = Pessimists, 3 = Ambivalents, 4 = Optimists, and 5 = Enthusiasts.

destroying potential). This is why we must begin with the truth that no technology is intrinsically evil, as something to be avoided in all forms.[27] Rather, tools are among the things the Lord made us to make, as we fill the earth and subdue it (Gen 1:28), producing God-honoring, people-blessing ideas, objects, and institutions that echo into eternity (Rev 21:24).

But to do that, we must adopt a sober, cautious, and virtuous approach to every technological development. Tragically, this is not something most people — including many Christians — appear to be doing at present. Instead, most are wandering into this brave new world like toddlers in a toy store. And while Tolkien reminds us that "Not all those who wander are lost,"[28] the truth is that most of them are (Eph 4:14, 18).

The way forward through this morass requires remembering the ways of our "only wise God" (Rom 16:17). Had he wanted more geniuses in this world — more people who are capable of instantly recalling massive amounts of information or writing epoch-defining classics or consistently preaching "grand slam" sermons — it is well within his power to make many of those. That God has not seen fit to do so should remind us that our God loves to use the weak and dusty (Ps 103:14) people of this world to accomplish his glorious purposes (1 Cor 1:19–27).

To the degree that AI may help us do that, let us use it for good. Yet to the degree that AI dishonors God or diminishes the people made in his image, let us abandon all such uses to the pit from where they came (Ezek 31:16).

Doug Ponder is the Academic Dean and Professor of Biblical Studies at Grimké Seminary. He is also a teaching elder at Remnant Church in Richmond, VA. He has contributed to several works as an author, editor, and researcher.

[27] Even the Amish use hammers, wagons, and plows. And the much-maligned Luddites, God bless them, were not against all technology. They were only against the *rapid* adoption of certain technologies which they perceptively recognized would prove disruptive to the lives of many human beings.
[28] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 2nd ed. (Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 162.

DAVID HAINES

Marc Cortez, the *Imago Deí*, and Ontology

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, a portion of the Champlain Towers South, in Surfside, Florida, collapsed, killing 98 people. It is thought that the building collapsed because of infrastructural inadequacies.[1] Alongside the great feats of human ingenuity may be listed the instances where human failure, due to lack of knowledge, wrong materials, or sometimes laziness, has resulted in deadly disasters. Other such incidents include the South Fork Dam near Johnston, PA, which, on May 31, 1889, after heavy rains, collapsed, sending some 3,600,000,000 gallons of water rushing towards Johnston, PA. This collapse, due to structural inadequacies, caused the deaths of 2,209 people.[2] Thomas Aquinas begins the Prologue of his *De Ente et Essentia* with a quote from Aristotle's *De Caelo et Mundo*, suggesting that "A small error at the outset can

[1] "Disaster Assistance: Information on the 2021 Condominium Collapse in Surfside, Florida," *U.S. Government Accountability Agency*, https://www.gao.gov/assets/d24106558.pdf (Published Feb. 26, 2024; Accessed May 16, 2026).
[2] "The South Fork Dam," *National Park Service*, https://www.nps.gov/jofl/learn/historyculture/the-south-fork-dam.htm (Updated March 10, 2026; Accessed May 16, 2026).

lead to great errors in the final conclusions."[3] This simple principle is discovered to be true in buildings and all human constructions, but is also true in our all too human attempts to articulate and defend a whole wide variety of truths across the academic disciplines. It is as true in the Natural Sciences as it is in Philosophy and Theology. What this simple saying suggests is that as pious as our intentions may be, if we introduce error in the fundamental elements of our speculative endeavours, we risk building a theoretical house of cards which will tumble at the slightest perturbation. This is, I would suggest, the fate of the approach to Theological Anthropology that Marc Cortez has been developing over the past ten years.

Cortez's proposed goal for his approach to Theological Anthropology is that he wishes to develop what he calls a "Christological Anthropology." Growing out of his interaction with Karl Barth's theological anthropology, Cortez develops a method which he suggests will help us to come to a complete understanding of what it means to be human, by beginning and continuing with observations drawn from what the Scriptures tell us about Christ. In what follows, we will begin by providing a clear explanation of Cortez's approach to Christological Anthropology. We will then note how and why he has determined that it is necessary to abandon a traditional Realist metaphysics and anthropology. In so doing, we will also explain what he has put in its place — how he seeks to explain what it means to be human — and point out some of the devastating consequences of this approach. We will conclude by showing why it is that his project not only fails to adequately explain what it means to be human, but why it also keeps him from being able to affirm the traditional Christian understanding of sexuality. Indeed, Cortez's project, though he may not wish to go there himself, appears to force him into agreement with transgender theorists, and, ultimately, to the denial of the very existence of the human person — which would entail the denial of the person and humanity of Christ.

CHRISTOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY ACCORDING TO CORTEZ

A Barthian Prelude

Cortez finds, in Barth, what will become the primary principles of his approach to Christological anthropology. The most fundamental point which Cortez draws

[3] Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, in Thomas Aquinas, *Opuscula I: Treatises*, vol. 55 of *Latin/English of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. The Aquinas Institute, trans. Robert T. Miller (Green Bay, WI: The Aquinas Institute, 2018), 259.

from Barth is that *it is only from, in, and through Christ that we can know what it means to be human*.[4] We find this idea developed in his earlier work, *Embodied Souls, Ensouled Bodies*, where he lays out Barth's approach to a proper understanding of humanity. Cortez suggests that we find the grounds for the Christocentric approach to humanity in Barth's understanding of the doctrine of creation, whereby Barth makes the following moves:

1. There can be no knowledge of creation without prior knowledge of the Creator, for the notion of "creation" is co-dependent upon the notion of a "creator."[5]
2. The very existence of creation is grounded in God's "decision to establish a covenantal relationship between himself and something other than himself," but the "other" in whom this covenantal relationship is centered is humanity. Therefore, says Cortez, summarizing Barth's argument, "if creation can only be understood on the basis of the covenant and if the covenant centers on God's relationship with humanity, then creation can only be understood in terms of this theanthropic relationship."[6]
3. Finally, if creation can only be understood through the covenantal relationship between God and humankind, this seems to entail that it is only through and in Jesus Christ that we can have some understanding of humanity, and, for that matter, all of creation.[7] It follows that Jesus-Christ is the only proper starting point from which we may come to any true and meaningful understanding of what it means to be human.

This basic argument provides us with what Cortez describes as Barth's *central anthropological principle*: though we may experience other human beings, or even humanity in general, we can learn nothing relevant from these phenomenal experiences about what it means to be a human; but, Jesus is, in every sense, the true man and the ontological determination of what it means to be human; therefore, if we wish to understand anything about what it means to be human, we must begin our study, not from the "phenomenon" of man, but from the archetype

[4] Marc Cortez, *Embodied Souls, Ensouled Bodies: An Exercise in Christological Anthropology and its Significance for the Mind/Body Debate* (London/New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 16–39, 60. This work will hereafter be referred to as *ESEB*.
[5] Cortez, *ESEB*, 18–19.
[6] Cortez, *ESEB*, 19–20.
[7] Cortez, *ESEB*, 20–21.

of man in Christ-Jesus.[8]

Cortez goes on to explain just what it means to say that Christ is the *ontological determination* of what it means to be human. He notes, first of all, that this entails that humanity is ontologically determined by divine election.[9] To be human, is to be elect in Christ who is, at once, both the elector and the elect in the truest and most originary sense.[10] Secondly, due to the fall and the corruption of humanity by sin, "human nature" has been inescapably corrupted by sin, such that it makes it impossible to know, from the phenomenal particular humans, what it means to be human. This is true on two accounts: (1) It is suggested that one cannot know what it means to be a human by looking at partic-

[8] Cortez, *ESEB*, 21–22. It would be worth exploring, in another paper, Barth's use of the term "phenomenon" which has a distinctly Kantian and Post-Kantian German Idealist flavor. One wonders if Barth's approach to Christocentric anthropology is grounded in the acceptance of the Kantian critique of knowledge, such that the phenomenal cannot be a source of knowledge, and what is in the noumenal, though fundamental for knowing and being, is, itself, beyond the human ability to know. If this is the case, then presumably what Barth is suggesting is that Christ must be the starting point of human understanding of the phenomenal because, entering the phenomenal from the noumenal, he alone is the ground of, and our only way to know what grounds, the phenomenal. An argument could be made that, if it is the case that Barth has taken the Kantian critique of knowledge for granted, and if it can be shown that Kant's critique of knowledge is at best flawed (if not simply wrong), then Barth's approach is both unnecessary and wrongheaded.

[9] Cortez, *ESEB*, 22.

[10] Cortez, *ESEB*, 22. Christ is both subject and object, thus overcoming the fundamental problem of Post-Kantian German Idealism (cf. *ESEB*, 30).

ular humans which cannot be considered as fully human because of the corruption of sin,[11] and (2) sin has so tainted the human intellect that it can no longer be trusted to arrive at any truth.[12] Therefore, it is only in Christ as incarnate and as faithful to the covenant — as the archetype of humanity — that we can have any trustworthy source for knowledge of what it means to be human.[13] Third, to be human is to be "summoned" by God into relationship through Christ-Jesus.[14] For Cortez, this means that the humanity of all humans is grounded in, and determined by, Christ's election, covenant faithfulness, and divine summoning to a relationship with God. To the claim that Barth put forth the idea that Christ participates in the same human nature and existence as we have, Cortez suggests, "The important point is to realize that Barth understands human nature primarily in terms of a being's concrete relationship to God (cf. W. Johnson 1997: 157). To become human, then, is to enter into the history of God's covenantal relationship with that which is other to himself."[15] These reflections all point back to, and support the central principle of Christocentric anthropology: Christ is the true archetype of human nature, in whom and through whom all particular phenomenal humans can both know what it means to be human, and, ultimately, become human. Ultimately, particular phenomenal humans are but tainted and corrupted imitations of the real, and give us no reliable knowledge of what it means to be human.[16] As such, to know ourselves, creation, and our creator, we must always and only begin with Christ.

Developing Christocentric Theological Anthropology

In the conclusion to his *Embodied Souls, Ensouled Bodies*, Cortez suggests that the purpose of a Christocentric theological anthropology is not so much to affirm or deny any one theory of what it means to be human, but, rather, to put limits on what can or cannot be said, by "identifying that which must be maintained and calling on proponents of the various theories to develop ways in which their theory can do just that."[17] This minimal role for Christological anthropology, in relation to understanding "being human," is the conclusion of his attempt to show how Christological Anthropology is able to help move discussions on human composition forward.

With this Barthian prelude completed, Cortez went on in

[11] Cortez, *ESEB*, 26–27.
[12] Cortez, *ESEB*, 27fn31.
[13] Cortez, *ESEB*, 27fn32, 28.
[14] Cortez, *ESEB*, 28–30.
[15] Cortez, *ESEB*, 31fn38.
[16] Cortez, *ESEB*, 32.
[17] Cortez, *ESEB*, 195.

the following years to develop his Christocentric theological anthropology. In a work published almost ten years later, Cortez distinguishes between what he calls a *minimally* Christological anthropology and a *comprehensively* Christological anthropology.[18] A minimally Christological anthropology "is one in which (a) Christology warrants important claims about what it means to be humans and (b) the scope of those claims goes beyond issues like the image of God and ethics."[19] With such a minimalistic definition, it would not be surprising to discover that almost any Christian theologian who takes the Scriptures seriously engages in this form of Christological anthropology. He points the reader to John Calvin as an example of a theologian who engages in a minimally Christological anthropology: his understanding of what it means to be human is heavily influenced by, qualified by, and given direction by, his Christology.

Minimalistic Christology, however, does not accurately describe the type of project Cortez engages in. Rather, Cortez explicitly seeks to engage in what he calls a comprehensively Christological anthropology (CCA), in which, "(a) Christology warrants ultimate claims about true humanity such that (b) the scope of those claims applies to all anthropological data."[20] In this way, Cortez sees himself as following Karl Barth's lead, though not uncritically or blindly, in affirming that what it means to be human is ontologically determined by Christ.[21] In *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology*, Cortez sets out to accomplish two things: (1) to make explicit the theological principles of a true CCA, and (2) show that CCA is able to helpfully provide guidance on a number of important contemporary questions.

In relation to the first point, Cortez argues, *first of all*, based upon his reading of the Gospel of John (and, especially the statement in John 19:5 "here is the man"), that "Jesus is the true telos of humanity, the eschatological end that God had in mind from the beginning," and, therefore, "that we must also maintain that this telos is intrinsic to the meaning of humanity. In other words, we cannot fully understand what it means to be human until we have seen true humanity revealed in Jesus."[22] In other words, to the questions "what is man to be?," or

[18] Marc Cortez, *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 21. This work is hereafter referred to as *RTA*.
[19] Cortez, *RTA*, 21.
[20] Cortez, *RTA*, 21.
[21] Cortez, *RTA*, 21.
[22] Cortez, *RTA*, 36.

"what is the end of man?," both of which are questions about human teleology, we must answer, "Christ." Cortez will go on to argue that "Jesus did not come merely to restore a work of creation that was already complete in the beginning and only needs to be returned to its original state. Instead, John presents creation as something that somehow needs to be completed in and through Jesus Christ."[23] In other words, it would appear that Cortez is suggesting that humanity (as seen in the particular instances of Adam and Eve) was not made complete or fully human in the beginning, then fell, and is restored in and by Christ. Rather, creation was made incomplete and is only made whole in and by Christ's incarnation. This interpretation of Cortez seems to be confirmed by his later promotion of what he calls an "intrinsic view" of the creational teleology, suggesting that "the eschatological consummation of humanity that we see in Jesus Christ simply is the meaning of humanity. Humanity has no proper telos other than eschatological consummation. Consequently this finality is *intrinsic* to the definition of humanity."[24] That is, man was not made as something that was complete in itself, but as something that can only be made complete in its eschatological (future) consummation in the incarnate and glorified Christ.[25]

Secondly, Cortez argues, based upon his interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15, that the incarnation of Christ was not simply to correct the fall, but "also as the one who advances creation toward its intended telos (15:35–49)."[26] He takes 1 Corinthians 15 to be arguing, not that Christ restores humanity to its pre-fall nature (is there such a

[23] Cortez, *RTA*, 48.

[24] Cortez, *RTA*, 50–51. He contrasts the "intrinsic" view with what he calls the "extrinsic view," which he describes as the claim that "distinguishes between what humanity is in creation (*nature*) and what humanity becomes through eschatological consummation (*grace*). The first tells us what humanity is *essentially*…while the latter reveals the *elevation* of humanity through grace (*RTA, 51*)."

[25] The way in which he labels these two views is indicative of a difficulty running throughout his entire corpus, which may be somewhat frustrating for readers steeped in classical or traditional Christian theology: Cortez uses words in unconventional ways. Here, for example, he describes as the "intrinsic view" a perspective which says the divine telos for mankind is not in the individual men themselves — it is not intrinsic to particular humans — but is found in the eschatological fulfillment of what it means to be human in the incarnate and glorified Christ. This idea seems to entail that the ontological determination of what it means to be human is extrinsic to humans, rather than intrinsic. The view he describes as the "extrinsic view" says, on the contrary, that the ontological determination of what it means to be human is intrinsic to all those things which can be said to be human, including the incarnate and glorified Christ insomuch as Christ is incarnate as a perfect human being. If we wish to affirm Cortez's view, it seems that we are forced to say (1) that there is, in fact, nothing *intrinsic* to human beings which is the ground of their humanity — the ground of their humanity is fully *extrinsic* to each and every particular human, with the exception of Christ; (2) the only proper *telos* of particular human beings is *not intrinsic* to them as human beings, but is *extrinsic* as it is found in an eschatological state — it is to be something other than what they are, and is found only in an *extrinsic telos* towards which they are directed or called.

[26] Cortez, *RTA*, 83.

thing?),[27] but, rather, that Christ directs man towards his eschatological consummation: a new humanity.[28] In the development of this claim, Cortez suggests that in order to understand the incarnation properly, "we could appeal to something inherent in the eternal Son. In other words, instead of affirming that the incarnate Jesus is the revelation of what it means to be truly human, maybe we should affirm that the archetype of humanity somehow resides in the essence of the eternal son."[29] This entails, for Cortez, that the pre-incarnational second person of the Trinity is the eternal archetype of true humanity, rather than the incarnational Son being the "true fulfillment of the archetype."[30]

Third, Cortez moves on to suggest that the traditional Christian understanding of the *imago Dei* fails because he thinks it cannot account for what he suggests is the Old Testament understanding of what an image of God is. This opens the door for him to suggest that "the *imago Dei* refers specifically to the humanity of the Son in the incarnation."[31] He begins by suggesting that theologians have traditionally held that the *imago Dei* contains intelligible content which can teach us about man (material role),[32] and is able to help structure or organize what we say about man (formal role).[33] Relying on the work of James Barr and other Old Testament scholars, Cortez argues that the purpose of an image is to manifest the presence of God in the world — not so much to *replace* God, nor to *be* God — such that the presence of God is representationally present.[34] With this Old Testament understanding in place, Cortez argues, on the basis of the New Testament texts which use the language of "image" (2 Cor 3:18, Col 1:15, 3:10–11, Heb 1:3, etc.), that our understanding of the *imago Dei* must be reoriented to the conclusion that only Jesus Christ is the *imago Dei*, and that humans may be transformed into the *imago Dei* insomuch as they are united with Christ by the indwelling Spirit.[35] This means, for Cortez, that Christ "inaugurates

[27] Cortez, *RTA*, 78–81.
[28] Cortez, *RTA*, 83, 84.
[29] Cortez, *RTA*, 97.
[30] Cortez, *RTA*, 97.
[31] Cortez, *RTA*, 101.
[32] Cortez, *RTA*, 102.
[33] Cortez, *RTA*, 101.
[34] Cortez, *RTA*, 107–13. He thinks that this purpose can explain "functional" views of the image (i.e., man's role in dominion or stewardship of creation, etc.) and leads to the rejection of "capacity" views of the image (i.e., man as rational, loving, etc.).
[35] Cortez, *RTA*, 114–115. He says, for example, "the New Testament views the image almost exclusively through the lens of Christology. Jesus alone is 'the image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15; cf. 2 Cor 4:4), the 'exact representation' of God's nature (Heb 1:3). We thus find that the focus of the *imago Dei* has constricted to such an extent that only *one* person actually qualifies! …Jesus's unique status as *the* image of God does not preclude others from participating in that reality. Thus, the good news is

true humanity" through the incarnation and the sending of the Holy Spirit to indwell all believers;[36] but, insomuch as Christ is the true human from eternity past, this entails that "being human fundamentally involves manifesting God's own glorious presence through the indwelling power of the Spirit."[37] To be human is to manifest the presence of God in the world and to the world by being made into the *imago Dei* through the working of the Holy Spirit by which we are united with Christ. In seeking to understand this *solo Christos* understanding of the *imago Dei*, Cortez first argues — based on Colossians 1:15–17 — that it must be referring to Christ in his physical and very real humanity.[38] He then notes that Hebrews 1:1–4 appears to connect the *imago Dei* with Christ in his divine nature, though pointing towards his incarnation.[39] This leads him to the conclusion that when we say that Christ is the *imago Dei*, what we mean is, "the *imago Dei* is true of the Son in virtue of the incarnation *and* that the *imago Dei* is eternally true in virtue of God's eternal decree to become incarnate in Christ. To use Barth's words, the 'ontological determination of man is grounded in the fact that one man among all others is the man Jesus,' and this is true specifically because 'the man Jesus' is the focus of God's eternal decree of election. Before creation, the essence of what it means to be human has been eternally grounded in the humanity of Christ."[40] Only the second person of the Trinity, in his eternally decreed incarnational reality, is the true human and the true im*ago Dei*; and, therefore, to be human is to be united to the Son through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, Cortez brings his theoretical arguments to a close by arguing, based primarily upon his reading of the book of Hebrews, that the eternal Son is true paradigm and "perfect representation of all that it means to be human,"[41] who, alone, really and truly "fulfills the creational design for humanity.[42] In what may be his most dizzying discussion in the theoretical section of this book, Cortez suggests that we need to understand whether or not Christ took upon himself a fallen or an unfallen "human nature,"[43] concluding that Christ must have had a fallen

that we can be 'transformed into his image' (2 Cor 3:18) as we 'put on the new self' that is being 'renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator (Col 3:10; cf. Eph 4:22–24) (*RTA*, 114)." Cf. Cortez, *ESEB*, 4.

[36] Cortez, *RTA*, 115.
[37] Cortez, *RTA*, 115.
[38] Cortez, *RTA*, 116–121.
[39] Cortez, *RTA*, 121–123.
[40] Cortez, *RTA*, 127–128.
[41] Cortez, *RTA*, 136.
[42] Cortez, *RTA*, 141.
[43] Cortez, *RTA*, 142–148.

nature, but without sin.[44]

The four claims we have presented above become the foundation for the eleven theses which he proposes as fundamental for any attempt to engage in CCA. Cortez will then apply these principles to three important contemporary moral issues: sexual identity, racial identity, and death. Before considering whether or not CCA is able to speak truth into these issues, we must first note one major difficulty the entire project of CCA runs into, which not only accounts for the dizzying maneuvers Cortez engages in to support his position, but also explains why he has such a hard time providing reasons for his claims.

CCA AND THE SIDELINING OF TRADITIONAL METAPHYSICS

Who Needs "Natures" Anyways?

We find, in Cortez's writings, as he grapples with what it means to be human, a progressive sidelining of traditional metaphysics. In his *Embodies Souls, Ensouled Bodies*, Cortez grounds his approach to anthropology in a distinctly Barthian understanding of humanity. What this means is that though the traditional language of "human," "human nature," or "human essence" is being used, Cortez does not want to commit to any specific understanding of these terms. This is made explicit in his *Re-Sourcing Theological Anthropology*, where he states that though he will be using "'nature' and 'human nature' to refer simply to whatever it is that an individual possesses or instantiates that is both necessary and sufficient to qualify that individual as a member of a particular class (e.g., 'human')," he goes on to note that his "intent is to avoid committing to any particular definition of 'na-

[44] Cortez, *RTA*, 164–165. This chapter provides an example of the type of reasoning we find throughout this work, as well as in Cortez's earlier work (*Embodied Souls, Ensouled Bodies*): he begins by laying down "Scriptural" Christological standards by which any theory must be judged adequate or inadequate; he then considers all the arguments in favor and against a particular position; he finds that they all meet the standards he has set for determining an adequate approach to the subject, such that one could affirm any of the positions without difficulty; so he then concludes that he prefers one position to the other; he then takes his preferred position as the ground for later claims (in this case, though he concludes that both positions — fallen and unfallen — are able to meet the standards he set for determining whether or not Christ had a fallen or unfallen human nature, he decides that the best position is the fallen view, because "some of the arguments [supporting the unfallen view] seem rather *ad hoc* [Cortez, *RTA*, 164]"). Ultimately, almost all of his conclusions appear to be preferred rather than argued for. For more examples of this type of reasoning see his *Embodied Souls, Ensouled Bodies*, pp. 153–54, 186–187. In each case, having spent an entire chapter considering arguments for and against specific philosophical theories concerning human constitution, Cortez concludes that most forms of the theory under consideration are able to answer the problems raised for them by a Christocentric approach to what it means to be human, and, therefore, cannot be eliminated on that basis.

ture.'"[45] He states that he will use the terms "essence" and "essential" in the same basic way.[46]

This essentially means that he is using words with no referent — presumably with the goal of understanding what that term refers to. Later, in articulating what he oddly calls the "extrinsic view" of human teleology (associated loosely with Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle, as interpreted by Edward T. Oakes, Kenneth Oakes, Neil Ormerod, Lawrence Feingold, and, later, Steven A. Long),[47] Cortez suggests what this perspective sees as determinative of "being human,"[48] and then calls upon Henri de Lubac in order to reject Feingold's perspective.[49] Cortez then explains Long's response to Lubac, in defense of a human nature which is common to all humans and the basis of what it means to be human,[50] but appears to reject Long's claims because Cortez's "intrinsic view" is able to account

[45] Cortez, *RTA*, 24–25.
[46] Cortez, *RTA*, 25, 51.
[47] Cortez, *RTA*, 51–55, 63–66.
[48] Cortez, *RTA*, 52. Here he quotes Edward Oakes for a definition of what a nature is, and then explains what he thinks this entails for the term "human nature." Cortez says, "*nature* typically denotes 'what is essential to something's identity.' To have a human *nature* is to have whatever it is that is essential for being human rather than some other kind of creature (*RTA*, 52)." He then lays out distinctions between Nature and Grace, and Nature and Supernature in his discussion of man's natural and supernatural ends.
[49] Cortez, *RTA*, 51–55.
[50] Cortez, *RTA*, 63–64.

for what Long thinks it loses (i.e., the ability to understand the incarnation and to know what a human is apart from the incarnation).[51]

In the context of this discussion, Cortez suggests that, "no one denies that we can know at least some things about humanity independently of knowing humanity's supernatural telos. That would be absurd since it would mean that non-Christians have no concept of what it means to be human."[52] This claim, which appears very level headed, seems to be contradicted by other quite dogmatic claims, such as that found on the very next page, where Cortez says, "the supernatural telos we see in Jesus simply *is* the definition of what it means to be truly human."[53] Perhaps I am simply being nit-picky about the use of words, but, when we say that x is the *definition* of what it means to truly (or as he says elsewhere, essentially) be y, this seems to entail that "to be y" just is "to be x."[54] In other words, an essential definition of x provides us with the *intelligibility* of x — it tells us "what" x is according to its genus and specific difference — such that to know the definition of x just is to have a true essential concept of what x is. But, if Jesus simply *is*, as Cortez says, the *definition* of what it means

[51] Cortez, *RTA*, 65–66.

[52] Cortez, *RTA*, 66.

[53] Cortez, *RTA*, 67. Cortez frequently makes similar claims throughout his works: referring to Jesus, Cortez says, "he is both the one who inaugurates the *new* creation in fulfillment of all that God intended from the beginning and the new Adam who is the eschatological culmination of God's plans for humanity, the telos that defines the essence of what it means to be human" (*RTA*, 50).

[54] Other than his summary discussion of the way he will use "nature" and "essence" and their cognates, early on in his *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology* (cf. Cortez, *RTA*, 24–25, 51–52), Cortez never returns to discuss the meaning of these terms, nor to redefine them. He also does not give us a clear understanding of his meaning of the word "define" and its cognates. As such, it may be that he has an entirely different understanding of the "definition" than we are here discussing. However, judging from the way he uses this term in conjunction with the terms "natural," "essential," and "necessary," it seems that he is referring to what has traditionally been called an "essential definition," that which refers to what x is by its very nature (cf. Peter Kreeft, *Socratic Logic*, ed. 3.1 [South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2010], 123–137.) In these pages, Kreeft outlines a number of ways in which one might use the word "definition," and also explains that the proper sense of the term definition is usually taken to refer to what he calls a Real Essential Definition, providing the genus and specific difference of the thing being defined.
When Cortez says that Jesus is the definition of what it means to be human, it seems that he is using definition in the sense of a real essential definition. The difficulty is, of course, if he intends to say that Jesus is the definition of what it means to be human, in a real and essential sense, he needs to explain how this is so — when a thing cannot be properly called a definition. As Plato illustrates so vividly in his Socratic dialogues, when asked what something is, pointing at an instance of it does not provide us with a definition, only an example. The question that needs to be answered remains, what makes this an example of what we are seeking to define?
On the other hand, when Cortez explains how he intends to "use" the words "nature" and "essence" and their cognates, he appears to be providing only a "nominal" definition of these terms: how he will use them in his writing, regardless of whether or not they point to anything outside of the context of his writing.

to be truly human, then (1) it is, in fact, impossible to have a true concept or definition of what it means to be human outside of knowledge of Christ, and (2) to be human is to be Jesus. This seems to entail that, (1) whatever a non-Christian may think it means to be human, this is, in fact, not true — or, at very best, not essential to being human; and (2) either only Jesus is human, or, in some mystical way, only those who are united to Christ through the Holy Spirit are human — but not in themselves, only insomuch as they are a part of Christ who, alone, is human.

Cortez's sidelining of all philosophical categories becomes even more apparent in his attempt to sidestep the entire Realism and Nominalism debate. When he arrives at his discussion of the effect of sin upon "human nature," he brings up the question of the nature of, and the relationship between, particulars and universals, suggesting that the argument in favor of the idea that sin has somehow tainted a human nature which can be healed by the redemptive act of Christ "only works if you are willing to grant the idea that there is such a thing as a universal human nature that can be assumed and healed in the incarnation. If you think instead that a human nature is a concrete particular that exemplifies the properties necessary for qualifying as a specifically *human* particular, this argument loses much of its validity."[55] The two views mentioned in this section are, presumably, simplistic articulations of some version of, first Realism, and, second, Nominalism. In what follows, Cortez appears to suggest that both Realism and Nominalism run into difficulties when trying to explain the effect of the incarnation upon humans.[56] Cortez later sidelines the broadly Realist approach with a handwave, saying, "But not only does this argument depend on the idea of a universal human nature, which many contemporary theologians would not affirm, but it also fails to address the matter at hand."[57] The first comment

[55] Cortez, *RTA*, 150. This discussion is alluded to earlier on in the same volume (*RTA*, 24–25).

[56] On the one hand, Cortez suggests that if there are only particular human beings, then one could not say that Christ's incarnational redemptive actions healed "humanity," for there are only particulars and nothing shared by them (Cortez, *RTA*, 151). There does not appear to be an explicit argument against Christ taking upon himself some form of "universal" nature, other than the statement, quoted from Crisp, that when Christ became human, he adopted some form of particular human nature rather than something universal (*RTA*, 151).

[57] Cortez, *RTA*, 172. The "matter at hand" is how to think about Christ's incarnational human nature, as to whether it was fallen or unfallen, and, if unfallen, whether it was "ideal" or simply unfallen (as in Adam and Eve). His response to the dilemma he has created is to say that "the eternal Son just is the paradigm of humanity (*RTA*, 172)." To avoid saying that somehow the pre-incarnational Logos was, in himself, the paradigm of humanity (which would immediately introduce serious

can be hand-waved in precisely the same way that he handwaves the historical understanding of the Church: who cares that some, or even "many" contemporary theologians dislike the notion of a universal human nature, when it was arguably the position held (though in a much more nuanced way than any of Cortez's writings suggest) by most Christian theologians for close to 1700 years of Church History. If someone is waving at you, it is only polite to return the gesture.

The second point which Cortez presents as a reason to reject the quasi-Realist perspective is that "it falls prey to the same argument as the previous paragraph, since before the fall Adam and Eve would also have participated flawlessly in this same universal human nature."[58] The argument of the preceding paragraph suggests that we cannot establish the uniqueness of Christ's humanity because, even if we say that he took upon himself a full, perfect, and unfallen human nature, this would not distinguish him from Adam and Eve.[59] But, according to Cortez, the Scriptures present Christ as "the unique revelation of true humanity."[60] Therefore, as Cortez suggests, Jesus could not be fully, perfectly, and sinlessly human in the same way as Adam and Eve. However, if he took on a "universal" human nature, then presumably he would have been human in the same way as Adam and Eve. Thus, the Realist approach fails. The Realist, however, might respond to Cortez by arguing that what specifically makes Christ the "unique revelation of true humanity" is *not* that he had a "nature" that was notably or "essentially" different from Adam and Eve or the rest of humanity, as this would entail that either Christ was not human or that only Christ is human. Rather, what sets Christ apart from all humans, including Adam and Eve, is that (1) he modeled perfect humility (John 13:12–15, Phil 2:3–8), (2) he did all things so

theological problems), Cortez tries to avoid these issues by suggesting that maybe "the paradigm of humanity somehow resides in the eternal Son, maybe as a divine idea (*RTA, 172*)." Even this is unsatisfactory for Cortez (though not for the obvious reasons — introducing difference into the Trinity, between the persons, as presumably only the Son would have the divine idea of humanity. Rather, his reason is that "the biblical authors never talk about some abstract, eternal idea of humanity as the paradigm of what it means to be human (*RTA*, 172)." Biblicism at its finest: the Bible doesn't talk about it, so neither should we.), as such, he contents himself with simply suggesting that "we should view the humanity of Jesus itself as the eternal paradigm. Jesus just is God's eternal determination of what it means to be human" (*RTA*, 172). We are left wondering what this can mean. Perhaps it is a mystery. If only we had some metaphysical means of avoiding the confusion, such as a more robust understanding of Realism — as we find in the church fathers and medieval theologians.

[58] Cortez, *RTA*, 172.

[59] Cortez, *RTA*, 171.

[60] Cortez, *RTA*, 170.

that through his actions and way of life that many "may be saved" (1 Cor 10:33-11:1), (3) he suffered voluntarily for the glory of God (1 Pet 2:21), (4) when tempted he did not sin (Heb 4:14–16), and (5) he obeyed the Father perfectly and without fail (Heb 5:8–10).[61] Many more examples could be given of Christ's exemplary humanity, but none of them even remotely suggest that Christ is anything other than human — in the same way that Adam and Eve were human, or us for that matter — but human perfectly, fully, and without the corruption of sin. There is no hint in Scripture of a different or unique human nature. It is upon these wondrous grounds that we are promised justification through the incarnation and redemptive activities of the God-Man, sanctification by the indwelling Spirit (being made into the image of the Son), and final salvation through union with God in Christ by the Spirit.

Cortez, however, takes these two points as sufficient to abandon the quasi-Realist approach, and to look for a different way of understanding what it means to be human that is grounded in the humanity of Christ. Consider, then, what appears to be Cortez's settled understanding of what it means to be human and see where it leads.

TO BE HUMAN IS TO BE RELATED TO CHRIST

Ultimately, suggests Cortez, to be human is to be related to God in specific ways,[62] and, perhaps more specifically, "to be *human* simply is to be related to Jesus" by being ontologically and epistemologically grounded in him.[63] The ontological grounded-ness is the relationship of being called or summoned to union with Christ — specifically as elect because we are included in Christ's election.[64] For Barth, Cortez states, "Humanity must, therefore, be defined as 'the creaturely being which is addressed, called and summoned by God."[65] We must add that the ontological and epistemological grounded-ness is described as (a) Christ's sinlessness which

[61] I have, here, presented the reasons given for why we are called to take Jesus as our model, and imitate him, in each of the verses which Cortez references when he claims that "each of these presents Jesus as the unique revelation of true humanity (Cortez, *RTA*, 170)." There is nothing, as far as I can tell, in these verses which even remotely suggests that Christ's humanity was of a different "nature" from that of ours, or even that of Adam and Eve. On the contrary, in most of these texts, the explicit message is that we—as fallen but regenerate human beings, through the indwelling Spirit—can indeed *imitate* Christ. Paul, for example, in 1 Corinthians 11:1, explicitly says, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."

[62] Cortez, *ESEB*, 31–32.

[63] Cortez, *RTA*, 174.

[64] Cortez, *ESEB*, 22-26. Cf. *ESEB*, 31–32.

[65] Cortez, *ESEB*, 29.

guarantees the eschatological end towards which we are called (ontological ground),[66] and (b) through which we understand what it means to be human (epistemological ground).[67] This construction all comes back to a single important claim that to be human is to be the thing that is *called* to eschatological union with God through covenant relation in Christ Jesus by the Holy Spirit.[68] But wouldn't it be more precise to say that to be human is to-be-in-relation, and, more specifically, *to be in relationship* to God through the covenant inaugurated in and through Christ — not simply called, but actually in relation as are the Elect?[69] This conundrum — the question of whether being human is defined by being called to or by actually being in relationship with Christ — presents a tension found throughout Cortez' writings, which we will address shortly. Perhaps for the moment, however, we may settle on the idea that Cortez seems to be primarily suggesting that *to be human* is, by definition, to be in a covenant relationship with God through Christ's election and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

This theological commitment, of course, raises some serious questions that need to be addressed: (1) there is the question of the humanity of those beings which would be considered human from the perspective of a traditional ontology (for they would be seen as particular instances of human nature),[70] but which could not in any way be seen as included in a covenant relationship with God in Christ: are they human? (2) There is also the question of how a "relation" can be that by which the nature or essence of substance (and not simply an accident) is *defined* (and, correspondingly, how this approach to human teleology could be even remotely considered "intrinsic") when a relation is a way of being which is extrinsic to the *relata*, and accidental to them.

Is It All or Only Some?

In relation to the first question — the status of the humanity of unregenerate "human persons" — Cortez thinks that the answer to this question must be "yes," suggesting that "the 'ontological connection' between Jesus and humanity holds for all human persons and

[66] Cortez, *ESEB*, 27–28.
[67] Cortez, *ESEB*, 28.
[68] Cortez, *ESEB*, 29.
[69] Cortez, *ESEB*, 21–26. Here we are told that, to understand what it means to say that "'the ontological determination of humanity is grounded' in the man Jesus," is that, first and foremost, "'To be a man is thus to be with the One who is the true and primary Elect of God'"—that is, to be in Christ (*ESEB*, 22). Cf. *ESEB*, 24.
[70] We are not talking, necessarily, about a particular instance of a universal. A great deal of nuance is required, which we cannot get into in this paper.

not simply those who are members of the Christian community."[71] Presumably, this is because to be human is to be invited by Christ into relationship with God — whether or not one accepts this summons. This idea is made explicit in *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology* where Cortez seeks to avoid two possible interpretations of his claims about human nature: (1) soteriological *Universalism* (if to be human is to be related to God by divine election in Christ, does this not entail that all humans are elect. Therefore, Universalism), which he avoids by suggesting that "[i]t does mean that all humans have been designed for eschatological consummation as the outworking of God's creational plan, but it says nothing about how many humans will actually arrive at this telos;"[72] and (2) Ontological Exclusivism (whereby only elect "persons" are human), which he seeks to avoid by suggesting that "all humans are human insofar as they have been patterned after the humanity of Christ and that all humans have been called to the eschatological telos we see revealed in Christ."[73] On both accounts, Cortez is forced to shift his claims from (a) to be human is to be related to God in a covenant relationship established by inclusion in Christ's status as the Elect, to (b) to be human is to be invited or summoned into that covenant relationship, whether the invitation is accepted or not; adding that (c) to be human is to be a thing which is "patterned after the humanity of Christ."

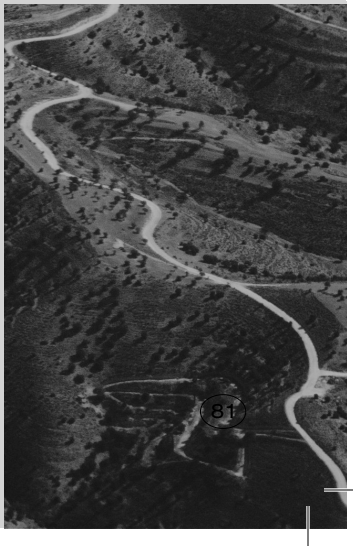
There are a number of points of contention that may be raised in relation to Cortez's fancy footwork, as he seeks to evade two unsavory positions. First, we cannot hold both (a) and (b) together, as the terms have significantly different extensions. In the first case (a), one is human whether or not they are in Christ — by the simple fact of being invited to union with Christ. In the second case (b), only those who are united to Christ can be said to be in the image of God and thus said to be human. Both cannot be true. Either all those who are not united to Christ through the indwelling Spirit are not human; or anything that is invited into covenant with God through Christ by the Spirit — by the very fact that it is able to be summoned to covenant union — is human (joining the covenant does not make it "more or less human").

[71] Cortez, *ESEB*, 30fn36.
[72] Cortez, *RTA*, 177.
[73] Cortez, *RTA*, 177.

A second difficulty that one might raise, assuming we decide to take the second option (b), as Cortez appears to do whenever he seeks to defend his claim against this very objection, is that we may still be left with the question of the nature of those who have been condemned to Hell. Presumably their invitation to union with God in Christ has been withdrawn, it has been rejected — having once been summoned, they are no longer summoned. Do they retain human "nature" once they are no longer "being-summoned" to union with God in Christ? If "being summoned" is what makes one human, then once the summons is no longer present, do they cease to be human? Or, shall we say that it is one's ability to be summoned which makes one human? Presumably those in Hell may no longer be summoned, and thus no longer have the ability to be summoned. Therefore, they are no longer human. Or, is it simply that at some point all were summoned, and this historic summoning is the eternal basis by which something is said to be human?

A related difficulty is raised when we attempt to relate the summons (for the sake of argument let's assume it is a pre-temporal summons that all humans of all times were included in for all of eternity) to the eschatological telos. If it is the summons which makes one human, then it is not inclusion in the eschatological telos which makes one human; it is only the possibility that one might wind up obtaining the eschatological telos. In both cases, it is worth noting that the ontological ground of "being-human" is not *intrinsic* to the creature, nor is it within God or even the Son. Rather, it is in something that is *extrinsic* to all those concerned. It is not even found in a relation between God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and the "summoned creatures": the eschatological union. Ultimately, it is entirely found in the ability to be receptive of an invitation: *to be able to receive a summons* to union with God.

A final difficulty with Cortez's attempt to escape both Soteriological Universalism and Ontological Exclusivism is that he adds in, almost as a fail-safe, that man is made after the pattern of the humanity of Christ. Now, we have already discussed a difficulty with this claim, based upon its *uniqueness* clause. A second difficulty, which we now raise, is that to avoid the claim that there is a pre-incarnational humanity of Christ, he will be forced to say that the paradigm or pattern of human nature either (a) is an idea of humanity in the mind of God, or (b) is the eternally known idea of what Christ



would become through His incarnation in human history, or (c), adopting the A or B theory of time, that paradigm is the somehow "now" existing incarnate Christ of 0–33 AD. He rejects the first option (as we saw above) and does not consider either options (b) or (c), simply stating that somehow Christ's incarnational humanity is the paradigm for all humanity. Though we could attempt to develop each of these options, it is more salient to the point we are making here to point out that using the language of Christ as "paradigm" or "pattern" upon which all humans find their humanity ontologically grounded is simply to return to the traditional understanding of what it means to be human: to be fashioned based upon the divine idea of human nature. As Aquinas pointed out, God creates from an archetypal form, a model, an eternal paradigm, or Idea.[74] The difference is that Cortez appears to be trying to materialize or incarnate the very idea itself. Here we may ask, assuming Christ's incarnate humanity is somehow the paradigm or pattern upon which all humans are based, what is this "humanity" that Christ incarnates? It can't simply be the divine nature, nor could it be the "person" of the Son, and Cortez will not allow it to be a divine Idea (too traditional). It follows, I would suggest, that Cortez either needs to bite the bullet and adopt the traditional metaphysics he has been so loath to accept, or, he needs to discard this additional means of grounding human nature, and return to man as "the being that can be summoned."

On Relations and "being-related"

We turn, secondly, to the question of how a "relation" can be that by which the nature or essence of substance (and not simply an accident) is *defined* (and, correspondingly, how this approach to human teleology could be even remotely considered "intrinsic"). One looks in vain in Cortez's work to find a clear definition of the term "relation" which is so fundamental to his understanding of human nature. So, one might presumably be forgiven for turning for help to the way in which some Christian theologians have adapted the Aristotelian understanding of "relation" for use in Christian doctrine. In his *De Trinitate*, Boethius considers how the various Aristotelian categories may, or may not, be predicated of God. Relation ("*relativis*" in Latin) is somewhat different from all of the other categories, for

[74] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.44, a. 3, *resp.* This is not the place to get into a discussion about how the notion of divine ideas and divine simplicity fit together. So we will simply note that Aquinas answers this concern.

though an accident is said to be predicated of a substance as "inhering" in it, "relation" does not appear to inhere within substance — even when predicated of substance. Boethius notes that "[i]t cannot therefore be affirmed that predication of relationship by itself adds or takes away or changes anything in the thing of which it is said. It wholly consists not in that which is simply being, but in that which is being in some way in comparison, not always with another thing but sometimes with itself."[75] Boethius goes on to illustrate the nature of relations by pointing out how we predicate relation in relation to location. Boethius illustrated the notion of relation by asking us to imagine that he goes and stands beside another person. He says, "[i]f I go up to him on the right and stand beside him, he will be left, in comparison with me, not because he is left in himself, but because I have come up to him on the right."[76] The predication of relation is not something that is in the substance or subject of the predication, but is predication of the subject insomuch as the subject is related to another. As such, a relation is a way of being which is extrinsic to the *relata*, and accidental to it. One does not define a substance based upon something which is extrinsic to it. What, then, could Cortez possibly mean by saying that to be human is, by definition, to be in a covenantal relationship with God.

Even a cursory reading of Cortez demonstrates his dependence upon Barth's approach to Christology, but a closer reading of Cortez reveals that he also appears to be approaching the "phenomena" of human nature from a broadly phenomenological and existential perspective.[77] Perhaps, then, he is using the notion of "relation"

[75] Boethius, *De Trinitate*, in *Theological Tractates and The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester (1918; repr., London, England/ Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1973), 27.

[76] Boethius, *DT*, 27.

[77] Though he does not explicitly claim reliance upon this approach to human cognition, it becomes apparent in (1) the language he uses, (2) his rejection of the metaphysical basis of a Realist approach to human nature, and (3) his dependence upon Barth. Take, for example, his statement to the effect that "One of Barth's most fundamental reasons for arguing that limitation is good for human persons is that he thinks it is only by having a finite history that we have a meaningful identity. Barth contends that humans constitute themselves as persons in and through their actions in time. Humans are *not metaphysical 'substances'* in which their identity is grounded in some stable, underlying essence. Instead, Barth contends that I establish my identity in and through the *history* of my personal actions and relations" (Cortez, *RTA*, 249. Italics are mine). To be human is not to have a "stable, underlying essence" (the rejection of Realism), but to become a person in socio-historically grounded actions and relations (this is the language and the conceptual structure of phenomenological existentialism). Note, as W. Norris Clarke has perceptively suggested, phenomenology may have a great deal of serious insights about being human, and we may be able to take advantage of it, but only if we ground phenomenological insights upon the metaphysics of a robust Realism (cf. W. Norris Clarke, "Thomism and Contemporary Philosophical Pluralism," in Deal

in a phenomenological sense? Phenomenology cannot reach beyond the perceptions of human experience to posit something outside of the subject,[78] however, this does not mean that it does not provide us with some understanding of what is meant by "relation," as we do have some perception of being in relation to others. Others are perceived as not just objects in a world that is for me, but as subjects which are, themselves, perceiving and experiencing the appearances of their own world as for them.[79] As such, I experience the world as "intersubjective," "actually there for everyone, accessible in respect of its Objects to everyone."[80] Are there others to whom we are in fact related? Husserl is intent on maintaining both that we experience reality as intersubjective — as a reality which is shared by many subjects — and that, in fact, we "must hold fast to the insight that every sense that any existent whatever has or can have for me — in respect of its 'what' and its 'it exists and actually is' — is a sense *in* and *arising from* my intentional life."[81] There is, then, no way of knowing that what we perceive as the other truly is other than my own subjective intentional life. As such, we need not worry about whether or not there is an other, and, rather, may concentrate on the nature of our relationships with the others so perceived. It is, perhaps, in this sense that we may see relation as no more than the intersubjectivity which forms our understanding of ourselves in our social contexts. This would fit well with Cortez's apparent agreement with Barth that, "humans constitute themselves as persons in and through their actions in time. Humans are *not metaphysical 'substances'* in which their identity is grounded in some stable, underlying essence. Instead, Barth contends that I establish my identity in and through the *history* of my personal actions and relations."[82] Of course, Cortez goes beyond agnosticism about the objective human nature to the denial that there is such a thing, coupled with the claim that to be human is to be historically situated and constructed through our actions and relations. If this is the direction that Cortez is going (denying the non-subjective grounds of ontology and epistemology and affirming a phenomenological ground of "human

W. Hudson and Dennis Wm. Moran, eds., *The Future of Thomism* (Mishawaka, IN: American Maritain Association, 1992), 98, 99–103).

[78] Indeed, this is one of the fundamental assumptions of Phenomenology, as developed in the writings of Edmund Husserl (Cf. the second and third meditations in Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns [Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999], 27–64). Hereafter referred to as *CM*.

[79] Husserl, *CM*, 91.

[80] Husserl, *CM*, 91.

[81] Husserl, *CM*, 91.

[82] Cortez, *RTA*, 249.

nature"), then he seems to be forced into affirming that Christianity itself is grounded in the subjects consciousness — Cortez being the subject in question.[83] With no ontological ground outside of the subject's own consciousness, why does Cortez so perniciously adhere to Christian doctrine?

Perhaps Cortez would also like to reject the Husserlian notion of relations along with the traditional Christian understanding of relation. In that case, it would be helpful if he could tell us just what he means by "relation" so that we can understand what it means to be human.

Presupposing Humanity to Talk about Humans

One final point needs to be raised before we conclude our analysis of Cortez's approach to human nature. This entire discussion appears to presuppose a concept of humanity by which we are even able to say that "the 'ontological connection' between Jesus and humanity holds for all human persons…"[84] In fact, are we not working with an already determined understanding of what a human is when we say that Jesus, in the incarnation, became human? Throughout his entire body of work, Cortez continually points to Christ as the eternal paradigm of what it means to be human. The question we must ask is, if we do not know what it means to be human prior to reading in the Scriptures that in the incarnation Christ became a man, how do we know what Christ became? Why think that Christ was "born in the likeness of men (Phil 2:7)"[85] means that he became incarnate *as* a "human being" when we don't know what it means *to be* a human being, or what a human being *is*? Some knowledge of what a human being is precedes our reading of Scriptures, not just in the incarnational claims of the New Testament, but even in the very first biblical references to humankind in Genesis 1 when we are told "Then God said, 'let us make man in our image, after our likeness (Gen 1:26)." This is the very first time any mention of mankind is found in Scriptures, and the assumption of the author is, quite clearly, that the reader knows that the term "man" refers to "human beings" (which the author and the readers are). Assuming that the reader knows "what" a "human being" is, the attending claim (that man is made in the image and likeness of God) tells us something about human be-

[83] Cf. Husserl, *CM*, 62.
[84] Cortez, *ESEB*, 30fn36.
[85] All Biblical quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

ings — at the very least, that they have a dignity which is superior to the rest of the things that Genesis 1 says were created by God.

From the creation narrative to the final book of canonical Scriptures, the assumption of the authors (both human and divine) is that the readers know what a human being is — what the referent for this term is. This natural knowledge of the nature of humanity is the presupposition for every single Scriptural claim about the creation, fall, and redemption of humankind in Christ. This seems to entail that, for Cortez's project to even get off the ground, though he wants to sideline traditional metaphysics, he must also presuppose that the terms "humanity," "human person," "human," and so on, have specific referents in the sensible cosmos, that the authors and readers of Scriptures — both pre- and post- incarnation — had access to. This very same meaning seems necessary for him to be able to say that Christ is the paradigmatic human being from eternity past through the divine elective decree. That is, without the presupposition of some content to which the term "human nature" refers, there can be no discussion of Christ as the "paradigmatic or archetypal human."[86] This point can, in fact, be illustrated by considering what it means to be made in the image of God in relation to art, the artist, and the work of art, which we will consider in our conclusion. For example, whenever a work of art is produced, it begins in the mind of the artist — at the very least in intention. That is, the artistic process begins in the will to produce and the idea of the thing to be produced. Before there can be something that is rightly called a work of art, therefore, there is an idea of it, which it will be said to resemble, and against which its being will be measured.[87] In the same way, just as the work of art presupposes the idea in the mind of the artist, so the existence of particular humans made in the image of God presupposes the archetypal form of humanity in the mind of God.

As we come to our conclusion, consider how Cortez's sidelining of traditional metaphysics actually creates the very problems that he sets out to solve in his *Re-Sourcing Theological Anthropology*: the problems related to what Christ's incarnation as a Jewish man say

[86] Though Cortez acknowledges that many theologians make this point, and are still able to engage in a Christocentric anthropology (the "minimally" Christological anthropology we mentioned above), he does not explain to us why this is wrong, but simply moves on to build his CCA (cf. Cortez, *RTA*, 19–21).
[87] Cf. Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 44, a. 3, *resp.*; q. 45, a. 6, *resp.*

about gender, race, and human bodies.

CONCLUSION: DEFICIENT ONTOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONUNDRUMS

In this article, we have worked through the approach to theological anthropology developed over the past couple of decades by Marc Cortez. In so doing, we have pointed out not only that he has effectively rejected the metaphysical and epistemological grounding of traditional Christian theology, but that in so doing he has effectively made it impossible for himself to understand both human nature and Christ's incarnation as man. He has effectively undermined his own project. In conclusion, however, it is worth noting that on top of undermining the very possibility of a theological anthropology and Christology, he has also created his own conundrums. The two primary conundrums that he mentions are how to understand human (1) sexuality, and (2) race. We will only consider the first.

The first question he runs into is what the maleness of the incarnate Christ might say about the *imago Dei* and what it means to be human.[88] Cortez points to a number of theologians who have suggested that Christ's maleness implies that, in some way, men share more in the *imago Dei*, and have a greater share in Christ, than women.[89] Cortez points us towards 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul could be taken to limit the image of God to men.[90] He goes on to suggest that, insomuch as the *imago Dei* "refers to the whole person and not just the 'spiritual' aspects of the person,"[91] that embodiment is central to CCA,[92] and that because Christ came as a man, "we need a way of affirming the centrality of Jesus's embodied existence without implying that maleness in itself is normative for humanity in general."[93] Cortez notes that one solution would be a form of metaphysical realism — that is, that there is a universal nature in which all particular human-beings participate; and, to be a particular human being is to be either male or female; therefore, in the incarnation Christ necessarily had to be either a man or a woman.[94] As we expect by now, Cortez is not willing to take an approach that is both traditional and would solve the issue in question, because, for some theologians, the

[88] Cortez, *RTA*, 191.
[89] Cortez, *RTA*, 191–192.
[90] Cortez, *RTA*, 192–193.
[91] Cortez, *RTA*, 194.
[92] Cortez, *RTA*, 195.
[93] Cortez, *RTA*, 195.
[94] Cortez, *RTA*, 195–196.

problem is that "it requires the existence of a universal human nature in which we all somehow participate."[95] Granted, the way in which he portrays this approach is so seriously flawed that it would have been rejected by many historical theologians. The confused nature of his explanation of this approach is made evident when we consider how he refers to "universal human nature" as a "common substance" that is "what makes a person human."[96] As such, one might argue that he is not so much rejecting the traditional approach as a straw man of the traditional approach. For Cortez, however, having already rejected such a thesis, he sets out to discover another solution.

Cortez's attempt to discover another way of thinking about Christ's masculinity leads him to affirm (1) that sexuality is an essential part of human experience;[97] (2) that thinking about Christ's resurrection humanity does not help us understand human sexuality in any substantive way; and, perhaps more importantly for Cortez, (3) that we must understand "Jesus as one who challenges cultural notions of masculinity."[98] The question is, of course, what does this mean?

Cortez begins by considering what *Gender Essentialism* would entail for Christ's incarnational maleness. Gender Essentialism is described by Cortez as the claim that "*masculinity* and *femininity* describe gendered qualities and behaviors that correspond essentially with the biological realities of *male* and *female*."[99] He considers a number of different ways in which one might approach the claim that certain gendered qualities follow upon, are related to, or are produced by, biological realities,[100] concluding that none of these approaches is sufficient.[101]

[95] Cortez, *RTA*, 196.
[96] Cortez, *RTA*, 195.
[97] Cortez, *RTA*, 202.
[98] Cortez, *RTA*, 203.
[99] Cortez, *RTA*, 203.
[100] One might (1) maintain Gender Essentialism, but suggest that Jesus' maleness was only limited by the "essential" differences proper to each sex, and not by the cultural constraints upon genders (Cortez, *RTA*, 204); one might (2) maintain Gender Essentialism, but argue that Jesus showed characteristics of both femininity and masculinity (*RTA*, 205). Here he appears to conflate gender and biological sex, suggesting that we "view Jesus as one who combined both sets of qualities [of men and women generally] in a single person [*RTA*, 205]." He is, however, unclear as to whether he means the "qualities" of male and female [which would presumably be referring to phenotypical and genotypical traits] or the qualities of masculinity or femininity [about which he is quite silent, mentioning only aggressivity vs. nursing and rough-housing vs. playing with dolls, *RTA*, 203]. This ambiguity becomes even more startling when he suggests that this approach entails that "in some way Jesus transcends the differences between male and female [*RTA, 203*]."); or, one might (3) maintain Gender Essentialism, but limit it to purely biological realities (*RTA*, 206).
[101] For Cortez, the first approach is problematic because he thinks that it

This leads him to consider a second approach, whereby one might suggest that the incarnational Christ challenges the entire "masculinity/femininity paradigm itself,"[102] and, in fact, "subverts gender itself."[103] Cortez seriously considers this position, suggesting that it shows that it is possible both to affirm that Jesus was a man, and that this says nothing about gender — which is nothing but a socio-cultural norm concerning how human males and females act and are characterized, both individually and in society.[104] How this claim is significantly different from either the second or third form of Gender Essentialism that he has discussed is unclear, as he seems to be suggesting that we can maintain the importance of the biological realities but affirm that there is no necessary connection between biology and gender characteristics or qualities.[105]

In light of his rejection of any form of realist metaphysics, Cortez's conclusion is somewhat confusing. He says that, "we still saw how viewing human sexuality through the lens of Christology can challenge existing conceptions of masculinity and femininity and the extent to which men and women differ essentially from one another."[106] This concluding statement, as balanced as it may appear,

entails that "(1) the male way of being human is more paradigmatic; and (2) Jesus cannot be the normative model for women (Cortez, *RTA*, 204)." But, if the humanity of Jesus necessarily "excludes women (*RTA*, 205)", and the Scriptures present Christ as the model for being truly Christian and human, this seems to entail that Women can be neither human nor Christian. The *second approach* is said to be problematic because, suggests Cortez, it ruptures the very claim of Gender Essentialism, which would find a direct link between biological sex and gender qualities (*RTA*, 205). In this section we once again discover the confusion he introduces into this discussion through the apparent conflation of biological sex with gender qualities. He says, "if Jesus can be biologically male *and* possess the qualities typically associated with being female, then it follows that such qualities are not in fact *essentially* female (*RTA*, 205)." Are the "qualities typically associated with being *female* (*RTA*, 205, emphasis mine)" gender characteristics and behaviors or biological qualities? Assuming the former puts Cortez in an awkward situation, we assume the latter, but, the only examples that he provides of "gender characteristics and behaviors" are, as noted above (cf. fn. 100) so minimal as to be unhelpful. One worries that he has, voluntarily or not, strawmanned this version of Gender Essentialism (perhaps all of the versions here discussed) by providing us with the most unhelpful description of what this theory is actually claiming. It would be helpful for Cortez, perhaps, to consider some of the stronger articulations of Gender Essentialism, such as that given by Charlotte Witt, in her book *The Metaphysics of Gender* (Oxford University Press, 2011). The *third approach* is said to be problematic because, he suggests, it is so weak as to not be worthy of the title Gender Essentialism (Cortez, *RTA*, 206). This, of course, is no argument, and merits no response. It is telling that in the entire section in which he interacts with "theories" of Gender Essentialism, he never once quotes or references a proponent of gender essentialism, appearing to draw his descriptions of the forms he considers only from their critics (cf. Cortez, *RTA*, 203–210).

[102] Cortez, *RTA*, 206–207.
[103] Cortez, *RTA*, 206.
[104] Cortez, *RTA*, 208–211.
[105] Cortez, *RTA*, 208–209.
[106] Cortez, *RTA*, 211.

is made to appear absolutely ludicrous when held against the backdrop of everything we have just seen.

A quick summary might help to piece this all together. *First of all*, Cortez rejects any substantive version of what might be called metaphysical realism — there is no nature, essence, or "common substance" that is shared by all particular humans, making them to be "what" they are. To be human, on the contrary, is to be in a covenant relationship with God through Christ — it is, as we noted above, not to have a "stable, underlying essence," but to become a person in socio-historically grounded actions and relations. We may then ask, *secondly*, what it means to have a biological sex — that is, to be male or female? Cortez may want to point towards certain genotypical and phenotypical features of the human individual, however, we must remind him that to be human is not to have a "stable, underlying essence," which is precisely what he would be referring to if he sets out to define "male-ness" or "female-ness." Indeed, if there are no natures, then there is no universal nature of being male or female either. As such, his claim that we can maintain the biological differences between male and females melts away into nothingness, like snow in Florida on a hot summer day, for there is no substance in which

"Indeed, if there are no natures, then there is no universal nature of being male or female either."

these accidents may inhere. Indeed, as Judith Butler and a number of twentieth century feminists have noted, if we reject a "substance metaphysics," then we must also reject the accidents of biological sex and gender.[107] Consider how, on Cortez's approach to theological anthropology, he is not only incapable of enlightening us about our human experience as sexed/gendered, but he is also incapable of avoiding Judith Butler's theory of gender

[107] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990; repr., New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 28–29, 33–34. Hereafter *GT*.

performativity.

Though the rejection of realist or substance metaphysics in relation to the question of gender and sexuality (commonly known as Gender/Sex Essentialism) can readily be traced back to John Stuart Mill or Sigmund Freud, we will begin our story in 1984 with the publication of Gayle Rubin's ground-breaking article, "Thinking Sex." In this article, she notes, first of all, prefiguring Cortez's claims, that in order to think about sex in such a way as to remove all injustice and oppression, certain axioms of Western culture must be eliminated.[108] She notes that "One such axiom is sexual essentialism — the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions. Sexual essentialism is embedded in the folk wisdoms of Western societies, which consider sex to be eternally unchanging, asocial, and transhistorical."[109] Sex is classified by the natural and human sciences as "a property of individuals."[110] She goes on to provide a summary of philosophical and sociological research carried out in the mid-1900s, suggesting that, "the new scholarship on sexual behavior has given sex a history and created a constructivist alternative to sexual essentialism. Underlying this body of work is an assumption that sexuality is constituted in society and history, not biologically ordained. This does not mean the biological capacities are not prerequisites for human sexuality. It does mean that human sexuality is not comprehensible in purely biological terms."[111] This appears to be very much what Cortez is affirming. Rubin recognizes that by denying realism and gender essentialism, she is affirming a form of Sex/Gender Constructivism.[112]

A similar theme can be found in the writings of Monique Wittig, who wrote her article "The Straight Mind" in 1980, and published it in a book of the same title in 1992. In "The Straight Mind," Wittig argues that the terms "man," "woman," "sex," "difference," and so on,

[108] Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in Carol S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (1984; repr., Boston/London/Melbourne/Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 275.

[109] Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 275.

[110] Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 276.

[111] Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 276.

[112] Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 306. She affirms as much in an earlier, equally influential, article titled "The Traffic of Women," where she said "The realm of human sex, gender, and procreation has been subjected to, and changed by, relentless social activity for millennia. Sex as we know it — gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childhood — is itself a social product" Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic of Women," in Rayna R. Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York/London: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 166. In both of her articles, she does allow for a distinction between sex and gender, but argues that they are both socio-culturally determined and have a history.

are all taken to be basic by the natural sciences, with a meaning that precedes discourse, and, as such, that they are never questioned.[113] However, she notes, "it has been accepted in recent years that there is no such thing as nature, that everything is culture…"[114] We see the same idea being elucidated, a little later, when she says that "for us there is no such thing as being-woman or being-man. 'Man' and 'woman' are political concepts of opposition, and the copula which dialectically unites them is, at the same time, the one which abolishes them."[115] For Wittig, as for Rubin, sex and gender are culturally determined concepts. They are not "natures," nor "accidents," rather they are impermanent cultural constructs with a history.

In agreement with Rubin and Wittig, and critically building upon their ideas, Judith Butler first suggested that the sex/gender distinction was introduced to dispute the "biology-is-destiny" approach to sexuality (a form of Gender Essentialism).[116] She goes on to note that if gender and biological sex are indeed distinct, then "the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders."[117] That is, if gender qualities or traits are not tied to biological sex, then there is no reason to think a male will be masculine, or a female feminine. Indeed, suggests Butler, it follows that "*man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one."[118] Now, if we have been following Cortez closely enough, it should now be obvious that this is where he must find himself. He has very clearly argued that there is no direct link between biological sex and gendered qualities. As such, it seems he is incapable of escaping this conclusion. However, Butler has not finished with Cortez. For, she notes, "If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all."[119] We have already noted that if Cortez is rejecting the existence of stable and immutable natures or essences,

[113] Monique Wittig, "The Straight Mind," in Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 27–28.
[114] Wittig, "The Straight Mind," 27.
[115] Wittig, "The Straight Mind," 29.
[116] Butler, *GT*, 8.
[117] Butler, *GT*, 9.
[118] Butler, *GT*, 9.
[119] Butler, *GT*, 9–10.

then he does not have a right to lay claim to any stable and immutable "biological sex." As such, Cortez is forced to acquiesce to Butler's claim: both gender *and* sex are culturally constructed. As such, his theological anthropology creates the very problems that he wants so dearly to resolve. His approach to theological anthropology not only creates the problems, it keeps him from solving them, and makes matters even worse, for Butler is far from finished.

Indeed, Butler goes on to note, in agreement with Rubin and Wittig, that the very notions of "being" and "substance," grounded in a "*metaphysics of substance*," have been found to be culturally and historically situated.[120] Thus, it is necessary to reject a realist metaphysics and all notions of universal and immutable natures or essences. And as we have seen, Cortez finds himself in agreement. Butler, however, unlike Cortez, is willing to follow the consequences of this claim to their logical conclusions, noting that "the critique of the metaphysics of substance implies a critique of the very notion of the psychological person as a substantive thing."[121] In other words, if there are no natures or essences, and therefore no substances, then there are also no "persons," just performances according to cultural norms. Butler puts it this way,

> In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. The challenge for rethinking gender categories outside of the metaphysics of substance will have to consider the relevance of Nietzsche's claim in On the Genealogy of Morals, that "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed — the deed is everything."...we might state this corollary: There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results.[122]

Of course, though it may seem revolutionary, it is unclear that Cortez can avoid this very conclusion: there is no human person, only a substantive relation relating to God through Christ. Though this seems to be the necessary conclusion of Cortez's experiment in theological anthropology, it is certainly not the message of Christian Scriptures, nor of orthodox Christian doctrine. I would

[120] Butler, *GT*, 28.
[121] Butler, *GT*, 28.
[122] Butler, *GT*, 34.

argue that the only way to avoid the Butlerization of Cortez's theological anthropology is to return to that realist metaphysics he seems so opposed to.

In this paper, we have sought to understand Cortez's approach to theological anthropology, articulating as clearly as possible his fundamental principles and doctrinal claims, and demonstrating that his system contains within it the source of its own failure. Most importantly, if we may sum up the conclusions of this article, by rejecting traditional metaphysics and epistemology, Cortez has effectively made it impossible to engage in anthropology and Christology, and he has ended up laying the foundations for a "Christian" affirmation of critical theories of sex, race, and so on. We have not sought to provide a positive contribution to the subjects in question, for the simple fact that there is no need. What is needed is nothing other than a return to, and defense of, historical Christian philosophical and theological doctrines — as found in the writings of Augustine, Boethius, Aquinas, and the Reformed theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. ><

David Haines (PhD ULaval) is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Boyce College and author of a number of articles and books such as Natural Theology: A Biblical and Historical Introduction and Defense*,* On Being: Plato, Natural Law: A Brief Introduction and Biblical Defense*, and* Richard Hooker on Natural Theology and Scripture*.*

KATY FAUST

Greater Than:

Why Christians Should Defend Embodied Parenthood

In state after state, a quiet revolution is underway. Birth certificates are being rewritten. Mothers and fathers are being replaced by "intended parents" in legal language. Children are increasingly defined not through embodied origins, but through state-backed contracts.

If they are even aware of it, Americans have been told that these changes are necessary for adult equality. But beneath the surface lies a deeper question — one the church cannot afford to ignore: What is a human child?

The just-launched Greater Than Campaign to overturn gay marriage understands that this question is far more theological than political.[1] And the answer is grounded in embodiment: children come from one man and one woman.

Scripture begins with a simple but profound reality: "So God created man in His own image… male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:27). Sexed embodiment is not cosmetic. It is not a social script or a personal preference. It does something. It generates.

Male and female are ordered toward life. The difference between man and woman is not ornamental — it is procreative. It is the means by which humanity ful-

[1] https://greaterthancampaign.com.

"The serpent's temptation invited the creature to become like the Creator — to define reality rather than receive it."

fills its first commission: "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28). Before there were clinics, courts, or contracts, there was this reality: new life comes from the union of a man and a woman. And because that union generates a child, it generates obligation.

That obligation was formalized by marriage. And parental rights — the recognition that the relationship between parent and child precedes the state — was fundamentally connected to that male/female union. Parenthood, therefore, is not something adults invent. It is something we discover in the body of the child.

But Genesis 3 introduces a fracture that still shapes our world. The serpent's temptation invited the creature to become like the Creator — to define reality rather than receive it. Ever since then, human beings have chafed against the boundaries of embodiment. We resent limits. We resent dependence. We resent fertility. We resent infertility. And we want to summon or dismiss relationships that do not suit us. It is a rebellion against the created order — our attempt to be like God.

Nowhere is that rebellion more visible than in the modern redefinition of marriage and parenthood. For decades, technologies like contraception, abortion, and IVF have reflected a growing desire to control whether, when, and how life begins. One seeks to prevent life. One seeks to end life. One seeks to engineer life. But all share the same underlying claim: I rule children, not God.

What began as a technological breakthrough has become a legal one. In 2015, the Supreme Court's decision in Obergefell v. Hodges redefined marriage as an adult-centered institution. The Court promised a "constellation of benefits" to same-sex couples. Some of those "benefits" required something deeper: children who would be raised apart from their mother or their father in the name of constitutional non-discrimination.

The problem is, children have refused to comply. Despite technological tinkering and Supreme Court pronouncements, children remain stubborn. They still come from one man and one woman. They still derive identity from that man and that woman. They are still most likely to be safe, loved, and developmentally supported when raised by that man and that woman.

Nonetheless, "equality" demanded that they lose one or the other. So the law was made to accomplish what biology would not — making two adults of the same sex parents of a child. That meant redefining parenthood itself. Since biology is inherently "bigoted" — it always insists on one man and one woman — the courts' answer to equality in parenthood has increasingly become contract-based parenthood.

Now, if adults can assemble sperm, egg,

and womb — and possess a valid contract — they can leave the hospital with an unrelated child. Parenthood is no longer recognized. It is assigned. And once it can be assigned, it can be transferred, negotiated, and sold.

The legalization of gay marriage led directly to child commodification. It assigned parentage rather than recognizing it. Generation is no longer received as a gift within created limits. Children are no longer begotten. They are made.

To commission a child is to assume sovereignty. It treats generation as a project rather than a gift. It exalts adult desire and sexual identity as god — and that god always requires child sacrifice.

This is why the Greater Than Campaign is necessary — and why Christians should lead it. At its core, the campaign is not asking the church to invent a new ethic. It is calling the church to defend what has always been true: that children have a right to the mother and father who brought them into existence — and to insist that the state recognize that reality rather than replace it.

When we honor those rights, children thrive. When we sever children from their parents — legally and technologically — they suffer. This is not a partisan preference. It is a recognition of how human children actually work.

The tragedy of our moment is not merely that we have redefined marriage. It is that we have normalized the intentional deprivation of children — and called it progress. The Greater Than Campaign confronts that inversion directly. It insists that every question about marriage and family must begin not with what adults want, but the embodied realities of the child.

Those realities aren't flexible. They're fixed. Children need their mother and father. They need their identity anchored in reality, not constructed by law. They need to be legally bound to the two people responsible for their existence. And they need the society-wide expectation that their mother and father will commit to one another for life.

For Christians, this is no mere social preference. It is obedience. To affirm embodied parenthood is to affirm creation itself. To defend marriage between a man and a woman is to defend the created order — and the children who result from it.

The question is not whether we must take marriage back. It is whether the Church will have the courage to lead. Because this is not ultimately a political question. It is a theological one — with profound legal consequences for children.

What we believe about marriage determines what the law will recognize about parenthood. And what the law recognizes about parenthood determines whether children are protected — or treated as products.

Katy Faust is founder and president of Them Before Us and spokeswoman for the Greater Than campaign

HUNTER BAKER

Is Gay Marriage a Candidate for Grafting onto the Tree of Conservatism?

WHAT IS CONSERVATIVISM?

When we think about what it means to be conservative, we tend to focus on the desire to preserve tradition. The conservative is someone who sees all of human history and culture as something like a grand oak tree with sprawling branches. Just to lay eyes upon it is to understand that it has endured for a very long time and that its great size and age reflect powerful capacities for survival. The tree's branches provide shade and shelter to all who gather beneath it. If the tree develops any rot or disease, the conservative response is to prune the branches, but essentially never to uproot the whole plant. Likewise, there may be innovation, but it will be by virtue of a kind of grafting. The original tree remains, but the new graft adds to the whole.

Radicals and progressives tend to take a different view of the historico-social tree. They look at the fruit of centuries, find it wanting on the basis of its flaws — real, imagined, or both — and conclude that it should be uprooted entirely and replaced with something new. It is this impulse that leads regimes such as the French Revolution or the Khmer Rouge to restart the calendar at the year 0 or 1 with the advent of their leadership. This is one way to think of the difference between conservatives and progressives. Conservatives deeply value tradition and the practices and beliefs that have survived for ages. Progressives view such matters skeptically and may assume things that have lasted for a long time simply reflect the influence of power, manipulation, and corruption unjustly honored by virtue of the passage of centuries.

The difference between the two might be well understood as the difference between the American and the French revolutions. The American Revolution is often re-

ferred to as being conservative in nature. America's founders sought to preserve what they saw as the best of the English political tradition, while jettisoning the monarchy and British governing apparatus they believed had become a threat to their legitimate claims to liberty and self-government. They emphatically did not seek to expel Christian churches or Christian influence in American society. The French Revolution, on the other hand, sought to overthrow both throne and altar and to establish a new total society. That revolution, certainly of the uproot-the-tree sort, engaged in radical political redesign and mass dechristianization (and the liberal use of the guillotine against its opponents).

GAY MARRIAGE WITHIN THE GATES OF CONSERVATIVISM

When we think of gay marriage and the embrace of homosexuality in the American mainstream, we may be tempted to view the change as largely a phenomenon of the progressive left. And certainly that has been a significant part of the story as President Barack Obama wove Seneca, Selma, and Stonewall (events pointing to women's suffrage, black civil rights, and gay liberation) into a kind of American tapestry depicting the victory of progressive movements over a kind of hidebound conservativism.

But it should not be lost upon us that perhaps the single most effective advocate for the legalization of gay marriage in the United States (and probably the West more generally) was the writer and commentator, Andrew Sullivan. Sullivan did his dissertation on the conservative thinker, Michael Oakeshott, whose view of conservatism tracks with that of our metaphorical tree. Conservatism, by his lights, was a kind of temperament or disposition. Sullivan approached gay mar-

riage from that viewpoint by arguing that marriage is a social good that benefits the people who participate in it. While he conceded that marriage had not previously been a same-sex institution, he believed that making it available to gay couples would actually introduce new stability to their relationships and would provide a variety of social benefits. It would also help to dispel uncertainty in socially significant areas such as health care, adoption, and inheritance. His arguments gained adherents and surely helped move the needle toward a change in the law.

In the wake of the change that was ultimately more a product of judicial decisions than by actual voting (even California voted against gay marriage in 2008), it is clearly the case that a substantial degree of acceptance has taken place. Mainstream advertisements, movies, and television shows regularly feature gay couples with no indication of revolutionary activity. The *New York Times* columnist David French, formerly of *National Review* and the Alliance Defending Freedom, has made the case that in the wake of Obergefell it would be too disruptive to rollback gay marriage as a social and legal institution.

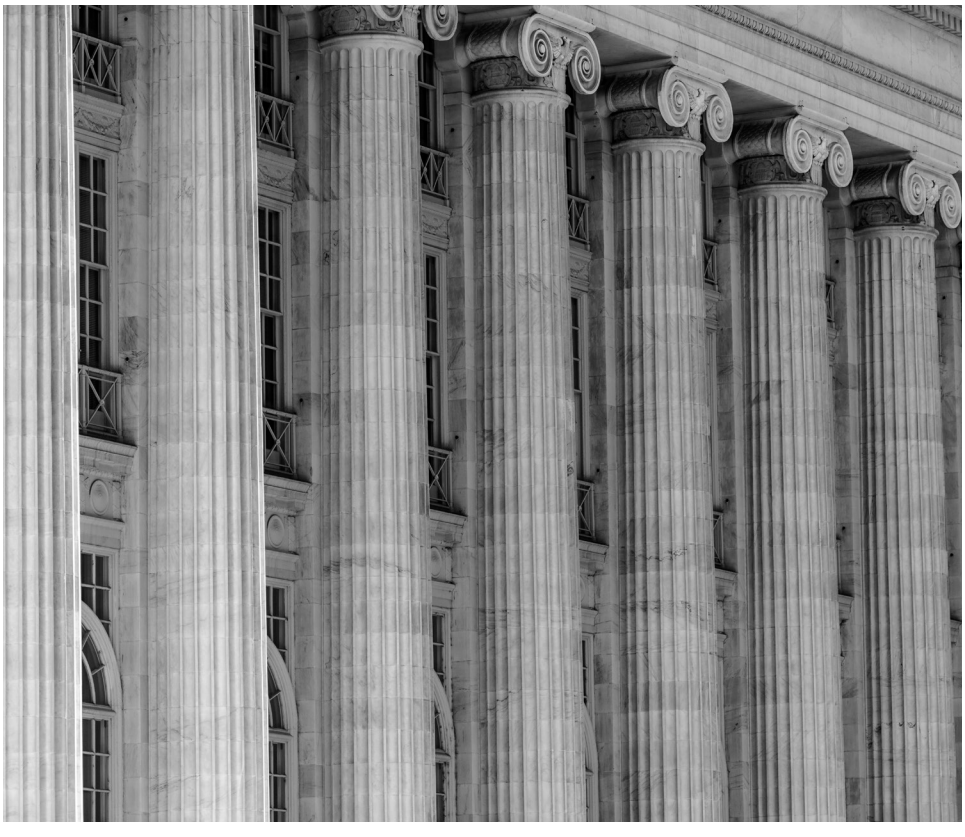
REVOLUTION OR GRAFTING?

So, the question is whether gay marriage represents something like a radical change that involves uprooting those things that are established or instead just a benign kind of grafting that alters an accepted institution to make room for a modest change. I would argue the first of those two propositions. Gay marriage has represented a massive break from tradition rather than an incremental one. Therefore, I would argue, gay marriage should not be viewed as a strong candidate for integration into a conservative view of the world.

In a recent lecture, Carl Trueman made the point that while Sullivan may have been successful in his advocacy of gay marriage, he seems to feel distress that the innovation has led to the deep confusion many now feel regarding sexual identity. As the gay marriage debate went on, some conservatives argued the change would open the door to any number of unhappy changes. Polyamory was one, and indeed we have seen that practice growing in the popular imagination (and likely in practice). But the more rapid follow-on change in the wake of gay marriage has been the transgender revolution that led to biological men fully invading the world of women from bathrooms to prisons to sports. Rather than bringing modest change and long term stability to marriage, the transformation of an opposite sex institution into one that can accommodate a variety of pairings have proved to be a gateway rather than a solidifying agent for the social foundation. Based on experience, and experience is a highly relevant indicator for conservatives, gay marriage upsets solid understanding rather than bolstering it.

CHRISTIANITY AND GAY MARRIAGE

With regard to the Christian faith, the question seems even more clear. The first thing the Bible tells us about human beings is that they are made in the image of God. But the second thing is that they are made male and female. And the first presentation of their relationship to one another is the complementary, intimate partnership of marriage. That marriage then produces the fruit which will lead to the life of every human being on the planet. There is no question biologically (no matter how we manipulate nature) that children are the product of the union of the male and female. Aristotle, by the way, identifies the male-female pairing as the fundamental unit of a society because it is only through them that there is a future. During the period when the debate raged the hottest over gay marriage, including at my



university at the time, I often told students that they could think about gay marriage however they might wish to do so, but that biblically there was nowhere to go. They could not make out a Christian case for gay marriage. Likewise, I told faculty that while we had no political orthodoxy at our institution, we did have a biblical orthodoxy. The reason to make such a statement was to indicate the necessity of maintaining the biblical understanding of human sexuality.

It is true that conservatism generally has room for course correction. I would argue that we have seen excellent examples in the form of diminished toleration for irrational prejudice based on skin color and the rejection of familial status or blood as determinants of one's social value rather than merit. But I do not think same-sex marriage will be the kind of change that offers similar benefit. Instead, it opens the door to social confusion and upheaval of the kinds we have seen in the wake of Obergefell. The change is not a modest one, but rather affects our fundamental understanding of the relationship between the sexes. And biblically, it is a dead end which can only be reopened via gymnastics of the most unconvincing type.

Hunter Baker, J.D., Ph.D. is the provost and dean of faculty at North Greenville University and the author, most recently, of Postliberal Protestants: Baptists between Obergefell and Christian Nationalism.

DANIEL DAVIS

A New Wilderness for the Pro-Life Movement:

Post-Roe Setbacks Reveal Cultural Legwork Ahead

In June 1858, Abraham Lincoln famously declared that "a house divided against itself cannot stand." He was quoting Jesus but spoke in the context of slavery. Lincoln said it would be impossible for the nation to endure permanently "half slave and half free." A reckoning was coming. America would have to become "all one thing or all the other." And so it did.

Lincoln's insight — that moral evil can't be contained within a polity without inevitably corrupting the whole — feels awfully relevant again. While civil war is thankfully not on the table, the moral tension that has turned state against state since the fall of *Roe v. Wade* resembles something of the moral chasm that marked the antebellum republic. It is becoming clear that that tension cannot go unresolved forever. Per Lincoln's prophecy, we are once again becoming "all one thing," and that thing is not pro-life.

THE POST-ROE RESET

The fall of *Roe v. Wade* was a moral and legal triumph — and above all, a grace from God. For half a century, unborn image-bearers had been crushed, poisoned, and flushed from their wombs "while the law looked the other way."[1] States could do next to nothing to stop it. *Roe's* defeat was well deserved. It was the fruit of decades of persistence, persuasion, and prayer from the pro-life movement. With *Roe* now gone, abortion law has been returned to the states. Subsequently, twenty states have enacted pro-life laws, and 13 have banned all or most abortions. This real progress ought not be minimized.

Yet the four years since *Dobbs* have been mostly defined by setbacks. With the *Dobbs*

[1] https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031105-1.html

ink barely dry, pro-abortion advocates sprung into action by pushing state ballot initiatives — often couching them in the language of limited government. These measures proved politically effective. In more than ten states, voters have now enshrined or expanded abortion rights — even in traditional red states like Kansas and Montana.

Perhaps the most shocking development, though, is the way blue state governors have turned their states into abortion tourism hotspots. With abortion now banned in much of the country, governors in states like California and New York have shamelessly lured women to their states to terminate their pregnancies.

What's more, at the moment when pro-life policy is most actionable, President Trump has been mostly AWOL. Sensing the issue to be a political loser, he has repeatedly deflected to the "states," as if to say, "*Dobbs* was my part — now I'm done." To his credit, the President did pardon pro-life activists who had been wrongly jailed. He also signed legislation defunding Planned Parenthood through Medicaid for a year. Yet he has still refused to wield his power where it could matter most: taking abortion drugs off the market. These drugs, which now account for two-thirds of U.S. abortions, are drastically deregulated — available by mail at the click of a button. These drugs are being shipped into all 50 states, making a mockery of state abortion bans and facilitating an even higher abortion rate than we had under *Roe v. Wade*. As pro-life leader Marjorie Dannenfelser has put it, "Gavin Newsom is determining policy in pro-life states."

Fixing this situation would be as simple as restoring the requirement that these drugs be dispensed in-person. That alone would bring mail-order abortion to a halt and save hundreds of thousands of lives. Yet this much, the President has refused to do.

For these reasons, the President occupies

a truly paradoxical space in the post-*Roe* era. On one hand, he has done more to advance the pro-life cause than any president in our lifetimes, having picked three of the justices who ended *Roe*. Yet his unwillingness to play hardball at this critical stage — and, in particular, his move to strip pro-life language from the 2024 GOP platform — have left the pro-life movement perplexed and demoralized.

WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS

Two years after *Dobbs*, HBO host Bill Maher mocked pro-lifers as "the dog who caught the car." We had overturned *Roe*; now, we had no idea what to do. Maher was wrong in one sense — the pro-life movement has an agenda; it only waits to be implemented. Yet he was right in a deeper sense: Americans simply don't buy into the pro-life vision, and they are refusing to be led into a pro-life future. We the people, who govern this nation,

keep voting for abortion.

This is partly owing to the law's shaping influence on the conscience. For 50 years, *Roe* catechized Americans to believe that abortion was essential to women's equality with men. Along with contraception, it reinforced the assumption that sex could be severed from responsibility, commitment, and parenthood. It taught that in a "liberated" world, where free love reigns, the right to kill one's nascent offspring is an absolute necessity. We are living in the world *Roe* built. Its legal form is gone, but the culture it birthed remains — and Americans on both sides of the aisle are invested in it.

But if the Old Testament teaches us anything, it is that law cannot change the sinful heart. And in a republic, laws are only as good as the civic actors who legislate and vote. So long as hearts of stone predominate, the pro-life cause will be fighting moral and political gravity. So long as sex without consequences is seen as an absolute right, the demand for abortion will remain.

This is the hard reality now facing the pro-life movement. Its success cannot rest simply on quick-footed lawyers and devout lawmakers. Its success requires nothing less than dismantling the sexual revolution.

This work must begin, first and foremost, in the church. Few Christians today realize just how deeply we have been conditioned by the sexual revolution. We must take a hard look, for instance, at the culture of contraception, which teaches married couples that sex and procreation need not be linked and that children are burdens to be delayed, not gifts to be embraced. We must also rebuild the marriage culture — helping young people find spouses and inspiring their hearts with a Christ-shaped vision of love and sacrifice. And we must help them escape the Gnosticism that would have them compartmentalize politics from biblical conviction under the guise of a "wall of separation."

Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what has been planted. In this new pro-life chapter, we must plant seeds of truth while plucking up the lies of the sexual revolution and the euphemisms that cloak what abortion truly is. We need more David Daleiden exposés and more Charlie Kirk-style campus encounters, where rational conversation challenges hearts and minds. We need to rebut the feminist lie that liberated womanhood equals manhood — and the manospheric lie that true men dominate and control. And politically, we need a vision for an economy that is less expensive, more liveable — more hospitable to new life.

It's a discouraging moment to be pro-life. Yet for Christians, there is cause for hope. While our fallen world groans under the weight of sin, Christ also came to destroy the devil's works (1 John 3:8), and no defeat is ever final so long as He indwells us. The wicked still do wickedness (Rev 22:11), yet the people of God restrain them (2 Thess 2:6-7). As the City of God, embedded with the City of Man, we contend for every life on sidewalks, in courtrooms, at pregnancy centers, and at the ballot box.

We have no choice. The children are still being killed, and God commands us to rescue those being taken to death (Prov 24:11). They have no voice. We do — and every child rescued matters to our God. So may we heed the encouragement of the Apostle Paul: "let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up" (Gal 6:9).

Daniel Davis is a pastor at King's Church DC who spent 10 years working in public policy and government.

JOSH HOLLER

IVF and the Fractured Right:

How the Church Should Lead the Conversation

Back in 2010 I spent some time in Uganda and was asked by a local pastor, "What do Americans think of (then) President Barack Obama?" I don't think this dear brother realized how loaded of a question this was! It depends on who you ask. As the saying goes, "Ask two people, get three opinions." Similarly, when the question of IVF is raised among people who are traditionally regarded as conservative, you'll likely get a similar response. Different viewpoints range anywhere from the finer points to positions that are admittedly opposed to one another — and all on one side of the political spectrum where one would expect to find a degree of uniformity. Instead of something that looks like a consensus or coalition among conservatives, there is a fractured voice regarding the question of IVF.

A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE RIGHT: OF THINK TANKS, NEWS COVERAGE, AND EVANGELICAL MEDIA

Conservative leaning think tanks display a spectrum of views. Some consider IVF as controversial but as beneficial for "family formation" which the government should not intrude upon.[1] Others see it as a novel technology that presents moral problems that should be more tightly regulated.[2] Still others view it as a legal question that needs greater clarity as to the status of the embryos.[3] And there are also those who emphasize the personhood and status of embryos, arguing that IVF leads to them being commodified.[4]

Evidence of this viewpoint diversity continues as you move to examine the discourse beyond paywalls, intellectual forums, and into the mainstream, event-driven coverage. Take, for example,the 2024 Alabama Supreme Court embryo ruling.[5] Coverage of this ruling splinters into a variety of perspectives focused on IVF accessibility,[6] Trump's executive order on IVF,[7] attempts to lower the financial cost by expanding IVF access,[8] offering discounts on key ovarian stimulation drugs,[9] and the oversight needed when embryo mix ups are made amidst many other clinical failures.[10]

Evangelicalism itself reflects this general diversity of views regarding IVF. Some argue against IVF wholesale;[11] others argue that it is a blessing;[12] and still others, threading the needle in search of a middle ground, acknowledge that there are serious moral concerns but insist there is a way to pursue IVF ethically that does not violate any biblical prohibitions or theological principles.[13] But as much talk

[1] For this general perspective see the following: Calder, Vanessa Brown, and Chelsea Follett. 2023. "Freeing American Families: Reforms to Make Family Life Easier and More Affordable." *Cato Policy Analysis* (Washington, D.C) 955 (August). https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/freeing-american-families. And: Ponnuru, Ramesh, and Public Opinion. 2023. "On Welcoming Babies." American Enterprise Institute. *American Enterprise Institute - AEI*, December 5. https://www.aei.org/op-eds/on-welcoming-babies/. And also: VerBruggen, Robert. 2025. "How 'Pronatalism' Could Divide the Right." *City Journal* (New York, NY), May 5. https://www.city-journal.org/article/us-population-birthrates-fertility-pronatalism-conservatives-tech-right.

[2] Waters, Emma. 2024. "Why the IVF Industry Must Be Regulated." The Heritage Foundation, May 19. https://www.heritage.org/life/report/why-the-ivf-industry-must-be-regulated.

[3] Epstein, Richard A., John Yoo, and Tom Church, hosts. 2024. *Epstein, Yoo & Senik Law Talk: Social Media, IVF, Trump, And The Politics Of Disgorgement*. Hoover Institute, March 1, 2024. https://www.hoover.org/research/social-media-ivf-trump-and-politics-disgorgement.

[4] Emma Watters at The Heritage Foundation has provided the best summary of the state of the question as it pertains to status of Protestant discussion and assistant reproductive technology. The Heritage Foundation has also been the most consistent think tank to raise the moral concerns around the personhood of embryos. See Waters, Emma. n.d. "Protestant Denominations Need Stronger Leadership on Assisted Reproductive Technology." The Heritage Foundation. Accessed March 30, 2026. https://www.heritage.org/marriage-and-family/commentary/protestant-denominations-need-stronger-leadership-assisted.

[5] Maxouris, Christina. 2024. "Alabama Embryo Ruling: State Supreme Court Rules Frozen Embryos Are Children. Impacts Could Be Devastating, Critics Warn | CNN." CNN, February 20. https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/20/us/alabama-embryo-law-ruling-supreme-court.

[6] Beech, Eric. 2024. "Donald Trump Calls on Alabama Legislature to Find 'immediate Solution' to Preserve IVF | Reuters." Reuters, February 23. https://www.reuters.com/world/us/donald-trump-calls-alabama-legislature-find-immediate-solution-preserve-ivf-2024-02-23/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

[7] Wehner, Greg. 2025. "Trump Signs Executive Order to Make IVF More Affordable and Accessible | Fox News." Fox News, February 18. https://www.foxnews.com/politics/promises-kept-trump-signs-executive-order-aggressively-make-ivf-more-affordable-accessible.

[8] Mitov. 2026. "Federal Bill Could Expand Access to Fertility Services." *Who13.Com*, March 27. https://who13.com/news/politics/iowa-politics/federal-bill-could-expand-access-to-fertility-services/.

[9] Brendix, Aria. 2025. "Trump Announces Plan to Lower the Cost of a Common IVF Drug." NBC News, October 16. https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/trump-ivf-fertility-drug-deal-lower-cost-rcna238013.

[10] Bendix, Aria. 2025. "After IVF Nightmares, Patients Have Few Protections." NBC News, NBC News, March 19. https://www.nbcnews.com/health/womens-health/ivf-errors-legal-protections-nightmare-mistakes-lawsuits-rcna194215.

[11] Walker, Andrew and Matthew Lee Anderson, 2019. "Breaking Evangelicalism's Silence on IVF." *The Gospel Coalition*, April 25. https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/evangelicalisms-silence-ivf/.

[12] Grudem, Wayne. 2019. "How IVF Can Be Morally Right." *The Gospel Coalition*, April 25. https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/ivf-morally-right/.

[13] Though I have encountered the so called "ethical IVF" argument many times in person, I have found very few who want to put their name to print behind any public resources created behind any such position. See the following web pages that argue for such a position, for example, but don't attribute any author. I have observed this an in increasing trend in the ART space

is happening outside of the walls of the church, how much of it is actually making its way to the pulpit? If it reaches the man who is entrusted to preach the Word, how much of it goes from the pulpit to the person in the pew? My pulse on the status of this issue within the church is this: not much is being said among church leaders. I believe there are four primary reasons for this silence.

1. MISUNDERSTANDING IVF

IVF is spoken about often in the news, but few know what actually transpires in its practice. Consider just last year when a pro-life Missouri congressman was presenting HB 1072 to ban abortion.[14] He was asked by one of his colleagues on the House Children and Families Committee about the adjacent issue of IVF. He responded that "IVF is pro-life." This assertion, of course, is not true. I don't believe the congressman was lying; I believe he was simply misinformed. If a state congressman presenting a bill to ban abortion doesn't understand that IVF routinely creates and destroys more embryos than it ever intends to transfer to the prospective mother, then what will the average person think of IVF when they hear it as a basic means to overcoming infertility? It's quite simple, they will similarly misunderstand the issue and have an uncritical and undeveloped understanding of what IVF entails.

2. IVF IS A THEOLOGICALLY RICH TOPIC AND THE CHURCH IS THEOLOGICALLY ANEMIC

In order to have a discussion about IVF, the necessary prerequisite doctrines that must be unpacked include, *at least*: the doctrine of creation, man, sin, marriage, procreation, the image of God, the moral law of God, justice, and death. If these foundational building blocks are not preached from the pulpit and if they are not regularly engaged with in Sunday School, men's and women's bible studies, one-on-one discipleship, the primary way one will engage with IVF won't be from the Word of the living God, but from the talking points they heard on the news or worse. Sadly, many churches today have avoided studying theology altogether at the risk of their attendance dropping. They have forsaken the study of Scripture by trading the feeding of the sheep for entertaining goats. The results are that, because pastors have not faithfully demonstrated how to rightly handle the Word of truth, our churches are doctrinally starved and unable to think biblically about IVF and other important issues.

3. IVF SHARES TERRITORY WITH POLITICS

We've all heard some form of the expression,"we don't want elephants or donkeys dividing us." While we must certainly avoid political idolatry, this trite slogan has effectively silenced the voice of our shepherds. IVF, like many issues, is unavoidably debated in our public square. Because it is political, the long-standing *de facto* policy of many churches is to simply be "hands off." It's a lightning rod issue that will rock the boat, and as the late Walter Martin, the original Bible Answer Man and author of *The Kingdom of the Cults* would say, "Too many people in the church have a bad case of 'Non-Rock-a-Boatus.'" Pre-2024, it certainly would have been *easier* to speak about IVF since it wasn't yet thrust into the news and center stage in the political arena. Post-2024, the topic has become far more politically

to hide behind anonymity. Fertility, C. N. Y. 2025. *Christianity and IVF: How Faith and Fertility Align*. November 1. https://www.cnyfertility.com/ivf-and-christianity/. See also "IVF: Moral and Ethical Considerations." n.d. *Focus on the Family*. Accessed March 30, 2026. https://www.focusonthefamily.com/family-qa/ivf-moral-and-ethical-considerations/.

[14] Sparks, Justin. April 15, 2025. *103RD GENERAL ASSEMBLY*. https://documents.house.mo.gov/billtracking/bills251/hlrbillspdf/2404H.01I.pdf.

charged, increasing the likelihood that pastors who avoid such issues will remain silent.

4. IVF INSIDE THE CHURCH SILENCES CRITICISM

I first took a deep dive into IVF during a bioethics seminar when I was a student pastor. When I told my then senior pastor of the alarming things I learned happen to leftover embryos, I was strongly urged to keep my opinions to myself because there were people within our congregation who had used IVF to conceive. Not every church staff situation will be this manipulative, but as pastors become aware of those who have used or are actively pursuing ART/IVF treatments, they will be forced to either stand on the Word of God or live in the fear of man. It's not just within the local churches that far too many pastors have chosen to be silent, but also Christian publishers. A friend of mine who has worked for several prominent Christian publishing houses knows women and editors on staff at each of these publishers who were actively pursuing IVF. To date, all of them have remained silent on IVF and ART. Our fear of being critical and receiving criticism based on our views of IVF has silenced not only many voices in the church, but also the publication of resources that could help equip church members wrestle with this complex issue. That, then, brings us to this question: how should we engage this issue within the church?

HOW TO EQUIP THE CHURCH

1. *Meet people where they are.*
   Someone who has already completed their IVF journey and has three leftover embryos is going to need different counsel than the young married couple who just had their second miscarriage and is now considering IVF. Both scenarios, and everything in between, need clear, compassionate, and convictional counseling in the truth of Scripture. Don't think you are disqualified from giving counsel because you haven't lived through their exact circumstances. Where we meet people isn't the authoritative grounds on which we stand but simply the starting point in ministering to them. Our authority is always the Word of the living God. Ultimately, the decisions we make must be made in light of the truth of God, not our subjective experience under the shadow of the fall.

2. *Teach the Whole Counsel of God.*
   This is where expositional preaching and teaching are your greatest allies. Such preaching, moving verse by verse through Scripture, disarms accusations of "political motivation," grounding your teaching and application to the words of Scripture. Expositing the text of Scripture further equips them with the doctrines necessary to understand the issues of the day, such as IVF. A series through the first chapter of Genesis, for example, will present you with the opportunity to make many real-world applications that directly touch many of the issues within the ART, pro-life, and gender/marriage arenas; all issues about which the Bible speaks clearly. It's even more urgent we instruct the flock in these key truths because the sheep are encountering these creational order issues on a daily basis. The church must therefore step up and equip its people to faithfully engage the world as it is.

3. *Create space for studying doctrine.*
   Expositional preaching will eventually cover everything, but sometimes issues are pressing, and your flock needs to be equipped more quickly than a sermon schedule will permit. Utilize the men's fellowship to study a systematic theology that will provide a foundational and thorough study of theology to equip the church to be conversant and able to apply the Word to the ebbs and flows of cultural issues. Similarly, churches should reclaim the diminishing Sunday School hour to have classes devoted to training the saints. The elders who are

entrusted with teaching their congregants can consider creative outlets like intensive labs or seminars that are topic specific to bioethics. Additionally, elders can trickle resources into the church by simply putting up a resource shelf to make key books and pamphlets accessible or consider adding a section to their church library for further study.

CONCLUSION

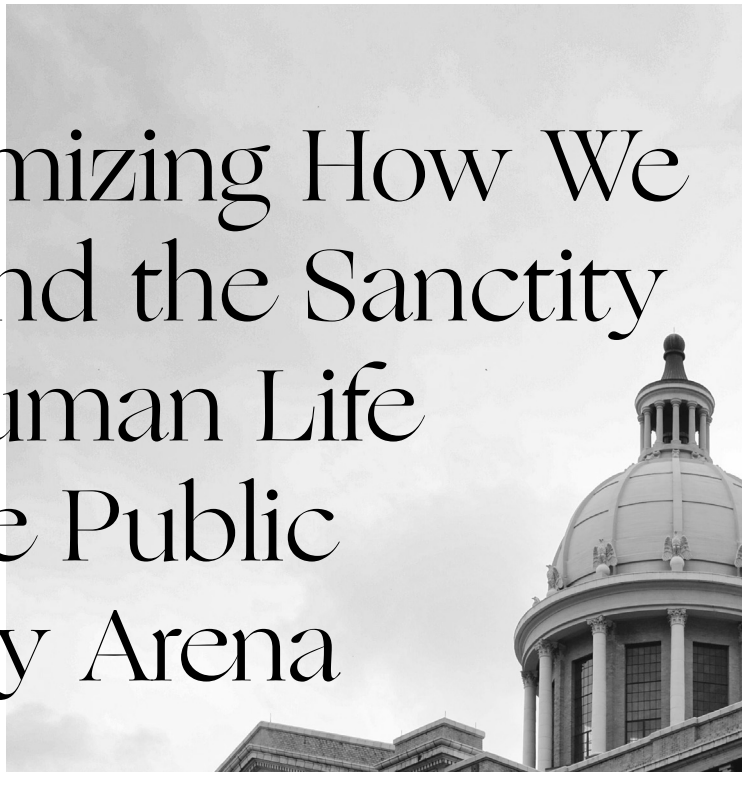
There's much the church can do within their arsenal to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Eph 4:12–16), to contend for the faith (Jude 3), and to engage the world with the Word. What we *cannot* do is be silent and outsource what is meant to be primarily the church's duty to the pundits of Washington or the talking heads delivering our news. We have this treasured, authoritative, inerrant, infallible Word of God which informs, textures, outlines, and guides our thinking about *who* creates life, *when* it is created, *where* it is created, the *context* in which that creation is blessed, the *penalties* for infringing upon that, and more. Why would we not take up this Word and wield it with faith and courage? The world may be fractured in its thinking. But God's Word is not divided against itself. Christ and his Word can rightly unite the church to lead others in how to think and live when it comes to precarious and confusing issues like IVF.

"What we cannot do is be silent and outsource what is meant to be primarily the church's duty to the pundits of Washington or the talking heads delivering our news."

Joshua D. Holler is the lead pastor of the First Baptist Church in St. John, Missouri. He is a Marine Corps veteran, husband, father of five, the award-winning author of Redeeming Warriors: Veteran Suicide, Grieving, and the Fight for Faith (Christian Focus Publications, 2020)*, and the forthcoming book* Misconceiving IVF: An Essential Guide to the Perils of In Vitro Fertilization *(Founders Press). Josh holds a BA from Wheaton College, an MDiv from Covenant Theological Seminary, and a ThM and PhD from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.*

DANIEL R. HEIMBACH

Optimizing How We Defend the Sanctity of Human Life in the Public Policy Arena



Christians understand the need to apply Scripture's teaching on the sanctity of human life, but should we assume non-Christians share the same understanding? The sacred value of human life applies universally, whether Christian or not. So, if the sanctity of human life is universal, and not just for Christians, can there be a way of defending it that does not get dismissed by non-Christians as faith-dependent and thus irrelevant to secular law and public policy? Evangelicals have been doing this by appealing to a common sense of human dignity that obligates respect for the personhood of all humans. But, defending the sanctity of human life by relying on the notion of personhood — without a shared faith in the God Christians worship — is almost never effective, because it is impossible to change the way non-Christians view personhood when they are deeply committed to justifying abortion. Non-Christians today cling to developmentalist thinking because it justifies the outcome they desire. For this reason, relying on personhood alone to advance the sanctity of human life in law and public policy usually ends in a draw with no one changing his or her mind.

But there is a more effective way to advance the sanctity of human life in faith-neutral terms, and that is by doing it the way God does in the Bible: without directly mentioning personhood at all. Ironically, defending the sanctity of human life without explicitly mentioning personhood is both biblically faithful and potentially more effective with non-Christians. I do not hereby deny the essentialist nature of personhood, and I think we should keep

using personhood arguments where others accept that approach. Rather, from a prudential perspective, I am saying that there is a better chance of changing how non-Christians in secular society view the value of human life if we instead focus on social obligation to protect innocent human life. Below, I look at what makes this way of arguing for the sanctity of human life consistent with Scripture and follow up by explaining what makes it more effective with non-Christians outside the Christian community.

In today's culture, everyone, whether pro-life or pro-choice, agrees we should value and protect the lives of innocent persons, and everyone agrees that murdering persons is wrong. So, it seems reasonable to put the sanctity of life ethic in non-Christian secular terms by saying abortions are wrong because murdering people is wrong and violates human dignity. But, while true, this way of promoting the pro-life position hardly ever works with non-Christians, because they do not agree with how we define "personhood." Debating abortion in non-Christian, secular terms comes to a standstill, not over whether murder is wrong, but over whether abortion kills persons. If it does, abortions are wrong because murder is wrong. But, if not, abortions are permissible, and the only relevant issue is a woman's right to choose.

Those arguing the pro-life position take what I call an essentialist view of personhood, meaning we say personhood is something essential to being human. An essential feature is one without which a thing does not exist. It is not marginal or optional. An essential feature does not develop, does not change, and does not grow or diminish. For example, it is possible for acorns to exist without becoming oak trees. But no acorn exists without being material because there are no immaterial acorns. Similarly, the essentialist view of personhood says that a human is a person because humans do not exist otherwise. That is, no humans exist as non-persons. On account of this argument, the essentialist view holds that all humans are persons from conception and that the extrajudicial killing of a human is murder. Because of this, wrongly killing a newly conceived human zygote is the same as wrongly killing a fully grown human.

By contrast, those arguing the pro-choice position take what I call a developmentalist view of personhood, meaning they believe it is a quality that develops over time, in the sense of evolving or atrophying depending on the degree to which a human life manifests non-essential functional criteria such as consciousness, ability to distinguish self from non-self, rationality, mobility, ability to sense pain and pleasure, or ability to communicate.[1] As such, it is thought that even though many humans become persons, some never do, some fail to become full persons, and some who may have been persons can lose personhood (as those features which make them persons diminish). This view treats human personhood the same as acorns becoming oak trees. An acorn is not an oak tree until it grows up. Some acorns become oak trees, but others never do. And some start growing but never get past the seedling stage. Similarly, the developmentalist view of personhood thinks no human life starts as a person and only achieves personhood as it develops various criteria. By such thinking, not all humans are persons, not all who are persons are full persons, and those who do become full persons can lose personhood. Along with thinking all humans

[1] Although proponents of this view think various functional criteria must be met to be a person, there is no standard list for what these criteria should be. Some propose appointing a committee of experts for getting this done. But then we would want to know what kind of expertise qualifies anyone to render such decisions? And we would want to know as well who can be trusted with power as vast as deciding the ethical value of everyone else in the world?

"...the Bible conveys the sanctity of human life ethic in terms of social obligation to protect human life regardless of functional capacities, maturity, or development."

start as non-persons, many think no one even starts becoming a person until after he or she is born. Because of this, it is argued that abortions do not kill persons and there is nothing wrong with aborting humans before they become persons.

What makes using the personhood argument in public policy debates so very difficult is that it is impossible to change how secular-thinking non-Christians view the meaning of personhood when it goes against the outcome they strongly desire. Everyone knows what adopting either an essentialist or developmentalist view of personhood implies, and those wanting to justify abortion will never call it murder. But there is another, potentially more effective way to get non-Christians to accept the sanctity of human life, and it turns out to be the way God does it in the Bible.

Conveying the sanctity of human life without reference to the question of personhood focuses instead on the social obligation to protect innocent human life. In Scripture, violating the sanctity of human life is put in terms of "shedding innocent blood." In Exodus, God says, "Do not kill the innocent and the just, because I will not justify the guilty" (Exod 23:7). In Deuteronomy, cities of refuge must be established "lest innocent blood be shed in your land" (Deut 19:10). Deuteronomy also says murderers must be executed to purge the land from "the guilt of shedding innocent blood" (Deut 19:13). And there is a curse on "anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood" (Deut 27:25, ESV). In 1 Samuel, David challenges Saul by asking "why will you sin against innocent blood by killing [me] David for no reason?" (1 Sam 19:5). In Psalms, a wicked man is one who "kills the innocent" (Ps 10:8). In Proverbs, we are told God hates "hands that shed innocent blood" (Prov 6:17); and, in Isaiah, God judges those who rush "to shed innocent blood" (Isa 59:7). In Jeremiah, God condemns the people of Jerusalem for filling the city "with the blood of the innocent" (Jer 19:4). And God warns King Zedekiah not to "shed innocent blood" (Jer 22:3).

The thing to see in all this is how the Bible conveys the sanctity of human life ethic in terms of social obligation to protect human life regardless of functional capacities, maturity, or development.

In addition to being a biblically-faithful

method, focusing on social obligation to value innocent human life also turns out to be a better strategy for advancing the pro-life position in public policy where one is dealing in secular terms with non-Christians outside the Christian community. And that is because it is very hard for anyone seeking public office to openly oppose the idea that society must protect innocent human lives. Without quoting Bible verses or discussing faith convictions, it is possible, when dealing with non-Christians about valuing life in law or public policy, simply to affirm that the most important principle distinguishing a civilized from an uncivilized society is whether or not a society protects innocent human life. One that protects innocent human life is by definition civilized no matter how primitive it otherwise might be, and one that ceases to protect innocent human life is by definition no longer civilized no matter how advanced it otherwise might be.

When debating the pro-life position in public policy, moving the discussion away from particular notions of personhood and towards social obligation to protect innocent human life shifts the advantage strongly in favor of valuing the sanctity of human life over freedom to choose death. In today's culture, using personhood arguments in secular terms has often led to stalemates with no one changing his or her mind, while relying on social obligation to protect innocent human life holds the likelihood to change minds and votes even among non-Christians. That is because no one can deny that what humans conceive is alive and not dead, no one can deny that what humans conceive is human because like conceives like, no one can deny that what humans conceive is actual and not merely potential, no one can deny that what humans conceive is distinct from the father and mother, no one can deny that what humans conceive is unique and no mere copy of something else, and no one can deny that what humans conceive is innocent in the sense of not having done anything worthy of execution.

These scientific facts are not disputable. And they all apply from the moment of conception until natural death. It is a matter of existence, not of development, and the obligation incurred applies to everyone regardless of condition — leaving no room to justify elective abortions except to save a mother's life. Candidates running for office are under pressure to agree, and candidates who do not agree are not likely to be elected. Debating the sanctity of human life this way is not only a biblically faithful alternative, but may prove more effective than relying first and foremost on personhood arguments when conversing with non-Christians. And that is because it bases moral judgment on something indisputable, and that is something personhood arguments do not do.

Daniel R. Heimbach is a CBMW Council Member and Senior Research Professor of Christian Ethics at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

JOHN S. BANKS

Jonathan Edwards on the Marriage Covenant

It would be a mistake to assume that the Puritans were devoid of romance, solely focused on strict discipline and logic. Challenging the negative stereotype of inflexibility, the young Jonathan Edwards mused about his fiancée Sarah, writing in his journal, "How greatly we are inclined to the other sex; nor doth an exalted and fervent love to God hinder this but only refines and purifies it."[1]

At twenty-four and she seventeen, it was the perfect moment for the marriage covenant to commence — particularly given the frequent disruptions to families in New England due to mortality. Additionally, the young man was running out of ways to express his affection for his future bride. In his private writings, his musings on the love of Christ for the church echo not only Scripture but also a longing for his beloved Sarah. Waxing poetic, he lined his paper, thus:

> How soon do earthly lovers come to an end of their discoveries of each other's beauty; how soon do they see all that is to be seen! Are they united as near as 'tis possible, and have communion as intimate as possible? how soon do they come to the most endearing expressions of

[1] Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellanies," no. 189, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (WJE Online, Vol. 13), Ed. Harry S. Stout, 331–332.

> love that 'tis possible to give, so that no new ways can be invented, given or received.[2]

These expressions of longing for the opposite sex might only be matched by a Solomon. Yet, the sweetness of this longing was to Edwards merely a reflection of otherworldly things. We would do well to rediscover such an elevated vision of the marriage covenant for the twenty-first century as was found in America's most brilliant philosopher-theologian. The renowned orator of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" was also a student of the "vivid images of gospel truths" found in the natural world, such as marriage.[3]

As a student of virtue-aesthetics, Edwards thought the marriage covenant beautifully illustrates the infinite unseen God, revealing his glory. It showcases the glory of the Trinity through the excellence of the inter-penetration of divine persons, known as *perichoresis*. God's excellence transcends what we observe in the world, whose excellence gives every part of creation, including marriage, its own meaning.

In his early years, Edwards envisioned excellence as the harmonious agreement of two similar beings creating a new entity through their union.[4] The term consent pertains not to the decision of autonomous individuals but to the manner in which one element aesthetically relates to another. For instance, our subconscious naturally gravitates towards harmony and regularity in our surroundings. We are adept at unconsciously adjusting the arrangement of furniture in our minds when we notice a couch that is misaligned, not proportionally positioned relative to the other sofa. There is a sense of delight in observing two pieces of furniture, though not identical, that relate to each other in proportion to the rest of the room's space. This tendency to pair elements brings joy or happiness.

Edwards finds his sense of excellence rooted in God's nature as expressed in 1 John 4:8, "God is love." Love, by its nature, needs an external object to avoid being selfish. Therefore, the Father is the source of love, which is poured out on the Only Begotten Son. The Father and the Son share a mutual loving agreement, forming a union so profound that it is embodied in the Holy Spirit. This divine triunity exemplifies excellence through its unity. And reflecting on God's excellence brings the highest form of happiness to his creatures.

Edwards acknowledged that there is a delightful joy when a man and woman unite to form a single entity. However, for a marriage to be truly beautiful, it necessitates a willing agreement to harmonize with each other. This consent is both aesthetic and voluntary because humans possess a spirit. Unlike inanimate objects such as a sofa and a couch, anything less than voluntary consent leads to objectification, chaos, and violence.

In a healthy marriage, mutual consenting love weaves a bond of union akin to a third presence, as seen in the Godhead. As hearts unite, this bond between male and female forms a genuine new entity, transcending mere legality. It is a persona that exists between a man and woman. This can be exemplified by the joyful discovery of finishing each other's sentences or sitting in silence as one brings up a topic the other was just contemplating. This results in a kind of

[2] Edwards, "Miscellanies," no. 198, 336–337.
[3] Edwards, "Miscellanies," no. 119, 284.
[4] "The consent of being to being, or being's consent to entity. The more consent is, and the more extensive, the greater is the excellency." Jonathan Edwards, "The Mind," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (WJE Online, Vol. 6) Ed. Wallace E. Anderson, 336.

happiness that only spiritual beings can truly appreciate. Edwards wrote of this intimate bond saying,

> And how happy is that love, in which there is an eternal progress in all these things; wherein new beauties are continually discovered, and more and more loveliness, and in which we shall forever increase in beauty ourselves; where we shall be made capable of finding out and giving, and shall receive, more and more endearing expressions of love forever: our union will become more close, and communion more intimate.[5]

Turning now to that unattractive deformity which consists of hatred and malice, Edwards recognized. Edwards realized that fallen humanity can distort the marriage covenant, damaging it completely by reversing love. How? By pursuing one's own happiness apart from the well-being of the whole.[6]

While Edwards eloquently expressed the ideal of marriage, he was acutely aware of the practical constraints imposed by humanity's fallen nature in aligning with God's will. This understanding might have been influenced by his grandfather's experience, who sought a divorce after his wife had six children and then abandoned the family for an extended period. In an exceptionally rare case, after a second attempt supported by a "council of ministers," a Connecticut court approved Edwards's grandfather's request for a divorce from Elizabeth Tuthill Edwards.[7] The marriage covenant could become a burdensome ordeal if one partner is unwilling to return the love of the other. Later, when Jonathan Edwards was asked by the Hampshire Ministerial Association for his thoughts on marital duties, he would write:

> [It] is said by experience to have cast off the fundamental duties of marriage towards his wife, may justly be looked upon as having put away his wife. [...] If such duties are cast off by an husband, the wife is not only *not* scandalous for departing, but 'tis her *duty* to depart; the great law of self-preservation obliges her to it."[8]

Despite Edwards's status as one of the greatest philosophers in American history, he was profoundly simple in the pulpit — especially during his second and final pastorate at Stockbridge, MA. After his dismissal from Northampton, he relocated his family to the Berkshire frontier among the Mahican. On a cold January weekday lecture, he warmly taught the Mahican about union with Christ from 1 Corinthians 10:17. He described this relationship to Christ as "the union of hearts." This union, he explained, was much like the "vital union" that occurs in marriage. It is the most solemn kind of union, as hearts become one by "their own free act and deed more solemn than a mere oath."[9] This comparison provided a simple way to understand the excellence that is found in a marriage covenant.

Edwards pondered marriage profoundly and devoted himself to loving his wife Sarah in a manner that was truly admirable. After thirty-one years of marriage, eleven children, and two pastorates, they both passed away in 1758. He succumbed to complications from a smallpox inoculation, and she died of dysentery a few

[5] Edwards, "Miscellanies," no. 198, 336–337.
[6] Edwards, "The Mind," 337–338.
[7] Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 22-23.
[8] Emphasis added. Jonathan Edwards, "On Marital Duties. Fragment.," *Family Writings and Related Documents*, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (WJE Online, Vol. 41), Ed. Jonathan Edwards Center.
[9] Jonathan Edwards, "Sermon 977. 1 Cor. 10:17b, Stockbridge Jan 1750/51 Lecture before sacrament," *Sermons, Series II, 1751, The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (WJE Online, Vol. 69), Ed. Jonathan Edwards Center.

months later. However, before Sarah's passing, she received a heartfelt dictation of her husband's final words. The doctor attending Edwards conveyed to Sarah, "Tell [my dear wife], that the extraordinary bond that has long existed between us has been of such a nature that I trust is Spiritual and therefore will endure forever: and I hope she will find strength under such a great trial and accept cheerfully the Will of God."[10] Edwards viewed his marriage as more than just a union of two individuals; he saw it as a spiritual existence or a third entity.

Rev. John S. Banks, Ph.D. (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) is the author of The Forgotten Edwards*. When he is not doing theological retrieval, he's renovating real estate.*

[10] Jonathan Edwards, "William Shippen, C143. William Shippen to Sarah Pierpont Edwards, March 22, 1758," *Correspondence by, to, and about Edwards and His Family, The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (WJE Online Vol. 32), Ed. Jonathan Edwards Center.

BOOK REVIEWS

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL CARLINO

Gender as Love:
A Theological Account of Human Identity, Embodied Desire, and Our Social Worlds

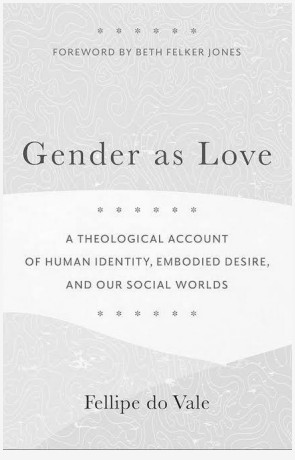
Fellipe do Vale provides a theological account of gender in his book *Gender as Love: A Theological Account of Human Identity, Embodied Desire, and Our Social Worlds*. He seeks to develop a framework that moves beyond the common binary opposition between gender as purely social construct (which he critiques for leading to incoherence or moral relativism because gender becomes arbitrary and unevaluatable) and gender as strict biological essentialism (which he critiques for undervaluing cultural variation). He grounds his account in Christian theology, particularly drawing on Augustine's theology of love as definitional for gender.

SUMMARY

do Vale defends four main theses:

1. Gender is an essence, though this is not reducible to or identical with biological determinism or biological essentialism.
2. The complexity of gender, the noetic effects of sin, and the current conditions of oppression complicate our epistemic access to gender's essence. All the same, we can be assured that issues surrounding gender will be rectified in the eschaton.
3. Any theory or theology of gender must be consistent with and supportive of the cultivation of justice.
4. Gender is concerned with selves or identity and with the way selves organize social goods pertaining to their sexed bodies (23).

do Vale's key constructive claim is that *gender is love* — more precisely, gender involves the formation of personal identity through our loves, specifically our love for certain social goods that are appropriated and manifested according to our



Fellipe do Vale. *Gender as Love: A Theological Account of Human Identity, Embodied Desire, and Our Social Worlds*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023.

sexed bodies. Drawing on Augustine, do Vale views human identity as a "bundle of loves." What this means is that *what* we love shapes *who* we are. Loves are directed toward goods (including social goods like roles, norms, relationships, and cultural expressions). He contends gender "emerges" when these loves organize social goods in ways tied to male or female embodiment. Social goods become "gendered" through being loved and pursued as sexed beings (e.g., manifesting one's body socially in ways recognized as masculine or feminine). This in his mind bridges sex (biological reality) and gender (social/cultural meaning and identity) without collapsing one into the other. Gender is thus embodied (rooted in sexed bodies), desired (involving affective orientation and longing), and social (pertaining to shared goods in communities).

The account is framed within the biblical metanarrative: creation (goodness of sex/gender), fall (distortion, including gender-based oppression and dysphoria), redemption (Christ-centered reorientation of loves), and consummation (eschatological renewal and justice). Normatively, the focus is on cultivating virtue and rightly ordered love(s) (ultimately directed toward God) rather than prescribing rigid trait lists for "masculine" or "feminine." This allegedly allows for a more compassionate and dignifying experience in society for those suffering under gender dysphoria or intersex conditions while affirming the goodness of male and female distinctions.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

There are three significant points of criticism I will focus on for this review, and that is how do Vale: (1) cites exceptions and distortions wrought by sin to undermine the knowability of creational goods; then (2) turns questions of gender roles into social justice (ethics) debates devoid of natural law (ontology); and finally (3) signals his model can be "accomodated" for so-called "trans ontologies."

In evangelical circles, a recurring theological error has emerged in which the familiar schema of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation is misapplied to undermine the goodness and intelligibility of creational norms. In do Vale's work, eschatology is pressed into service to effectively abrogate or relativize these created goods. What Scripture presents as natural features or fitting applications of the created order (e.g. male headship in marriage; male-only clergy, etc.) are instead recast as distortions introduced by the fall, and therefore as constructions that can (and should) purportedly be left behind. This approach, however, rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between nature and grace. As the Christian tradition has long affirmed, grace does not destroy nature; it restores and perfects it. The redemptive work of Christ and the hope of consummation do not nullify the structures, norms, and goods embedded in creation. Rather, they restore

what sin has marred and bring those goods to their intended fullness and glory. do Vale gives assent to such sentiments while simultaneously subverting them with his theological methodology and application.

My primary frustration after reading the book is that it proves consistently (and even intentionally) impractical as a guide for Christian living. It repeatedly appeals to exceptions, pathologies, or post-fall distortions in order to cast doubt upon the clear norms and patterns that Scripture reveals within the created order itself. By treating the abnormal or the broken as normative for theological reflection, or by citing disorders such as intersex as reason to "withhold epistemic surety" (203), the argument subtly erodes confidence in the goodness and reliability of God's original design. In the end, exceptions do not prove the rule, but rather, for do Vale, exceptions remove epistemological assurance that there are metaphysical norms which can be known.

In short, when one cuts through the weeds of what it means that humans are "love bundles" we find yet another effort from a modern evangelical to reduce gender to little more than biology. do Vale explains that according to his model, the "kind essence 'man' requires nothing other than a male body and the identity-forming love of particular social goods, and the kind essence 'woman' requires nothing other than a female body doing the same" (170). In so doing he seeks to transpose the conversation from ontology into ethics "where concrete individuals actually live" (170). Such a move, we are led to believe, is "Augustinian," even Christian.

But what happens when we move away from ontology into ethics for the sake of gender justice? Unsurprisingly, for do Vale it at least opens the door for female ordination:

> Debates about the ordination of women are, in many ways, debates about whether ordination is a gendered good, a good to be loved and appropriated only by those with

> particular bodies. Is ordination a gendered good to be loved in virtue of one's sex, or should it be seen as a good to be loved independent of sex? For some, including myself, *it is unjust to preclude in a categorical way all those with female bodies from loving this good and occupying the social role it creates* (166, emphasis mine).

Notice how do Vale moves the debate about female ordination from one of ontology into a question of ethics, before pronouncing it is therefore unjust to preclude an individual *with a female body and identity-forming love* from "this 'social good.'" Here and elsewhere, do Vale repeatedly plays the trump card of value and worth to dismiss the specter of hierarchy and oppression. The reader is left to assume a direct correlation — if not outright causation — between the two. This critique draws its force from the prevailing egalitarian spirit of our age. However, those who affirm a robust ontology (that the distinctions between men and women run deeper than mere embodiment and/or self-perceived identity) will assuredly remain unimpressed.

In fact, at one point do Vale critiques an essay published in a previous *Eikon* which he summarizes as favoring a "natural law approach to gender and claims that Adam's creation temporally prior to Eve must mean that masculinity is identical to authority" (181). But is this not precisely what the Apostle Paul teaches in 1 Timothy 2:11–13? As Kyle Claunch and I have argued on these verses:

> Adam's appointment to this role [as federal head of all humanity — including Eve — and Eve's head in marriage] is not a result of his order of creation, rather his order of creation reveals his appointment. Furthermore, this appointment was not arbitrary, such that God could have interchangeably created Eve first and appointed her the head. As natural complementarians, we readily affirm male headship (covenantally defined) in the church and home, and male leadership (naturally fitting) as the norm in broader society are not merely a product of Bible verses, as though Scripture speaks such concepts into existence *ex nihilo*. Rather, the Bible ratifies God's design and thus reality. Put differently, we maintain that covenantal headship in the church and home is built upon God's created order, and therefore the principle of male leadership cannot be confined only to these domains, as though it has no bearing on the broader society.[1]

do Vale is not wrong to suggest that a traditional natural law approach to anthropology concludes masculinity is inherently authoritative and femininity is inherently submissive. He is wrong to disparage such conclusions. Rather than ask "has God surely said?," his workaround frames it as, "why would God unjustly discriminate against those with female bodies?" Once ontology is critiqued and removed, the ethical deliberation pertaining to whether a woman is qualified for pastoral ministry is centered around "those with female bodies," such that ontology is reduced to and/or even replaced by biology and identity formation. I contend that this line of thought undermines God's good design for male and female distinction, which goes far deeper than the thin account for essence offered by do Vale. [2]

[1] Kyle Claunch and Michael Carlino, "Gender Essentialism in Anthropological, Covenantal, and Christological Perspective," Eikon 6, no. 2 (Fall 2024): 38.
[2] For more on the depths of the distinctions between men and women, see Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Christian's Library Press, 2012), 67–69.

Lastly, do Vale candidly reveals in a footnote that his model is "not necessarily a trans* exclusive ontology," because the "only modification required would be to organize around "the perception of a male body, and *mutatis mutandis* for female bodies. The actual possession of a female body is not needed to be perceived as having one" (170n70). This is truly an astounding claim. To be clear, do Vale is *not* advocating for a so-called "trans ontology," as his self-admitted "attenuated form of gender essentialism" seeks to "avoid both gender skepticism and biological essentialism…Crucially, this essentialism is useful for virtually nothing other than the prevention of gender skepticism" (170). But allow me to amplify the self-defeating irony: do Vale's "gender" essentialism is useful for nothing other than not being skeptical of gender — a low bar indeed — but he himself then notes his system can be accommodated by/for those who deny even his most minimalist claims.

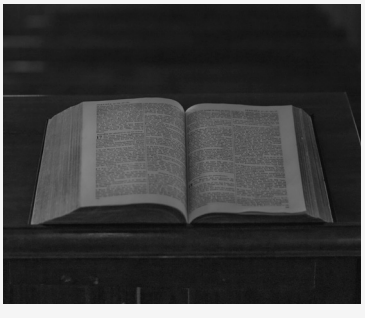
It is precisely at this point that the "theological" framework offered by do Vale reveals itself to be so minimalist as to be useless for and antagonistic to Christian witness. To put the matter bluntly: any anthropological model that can be comfortably accommodated within a so-called "trans ontology" — a phrase that is itself an oxymoron — is inherently unfit for faithful Christian service. Recent legal developments only underscore the urgency of this critique. In the landmark case of Fox Varian, a detransitioner was awarded $2 million in damages against Dr. Simon Chin for failing to obtain truly informed consent before performing irreversible surgical procedures. Cases like this signal that the ideological edifice of transgenderism is beginning to crumble under the weight of its own medical, psychological, and ethical malpractice. History will not judge kindly those who, in the name of theological sophistication, offered a thin and attenuated account of human identity and embodied desire open to such morally repugnant ideologies.

The sophistry of thinkers like do Vale lies in proposing a vision of theological anthropology so stripped of its biblical substance that transgenderism is not repudiated as a profound distortion of the *imago Dei*, but is instead quietly invited to find accommodation within this professed "Christian" framework. What is presented as nuanced engagement is, in reality, a capitulation that exchanges the clear teaching of Scripture on creation, fall, and redemption for a vague essentialism in which the givenness of the body is treated as negotiable. It is sad enough a professing Christian scholar thinks this way anthropologically, it is worse yet that such thoughts were put to paper and printed by a major Christian publisher.

Michael Carlino is Managing Editor of Eikon and CMBW Operations Director. He is also an Adjunct Professor of Christian Theology at Boyce College, in Louisville, KY. He and his family live in Clarksville, IN.

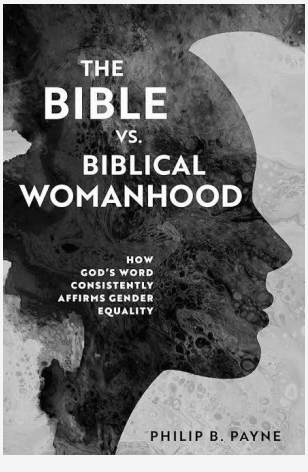
REVIEWED BY JOSHUA M. GREEVER

The Bible vs.



INTRODUCTION

The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood represents Philip Payne's most recent attempt to affirm the biblical basis for men and women as equal in the home, church, and society. The book summarizes and extends his prior work on the subject, particularly his 2009 work *Man and Woman, One in Christ*. As indicated by the title, Payne rejects the notion of "biblical womanhood," which he describes as "male headship" and "female subordination." The book's thesis is that "God desires men and women to serve and lead alongside each other within the church and family, as equals, in whatever ways they are gifted" (182).



Philip B. Payne. *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood: How God's Word Consistently Affirms Gender Equality*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023.

Biblical Womanhood

SUMMARY

Not counting the front and back matter, the book comes in at just under 200 pages, which means it moves quickly through the relevant biblical texts and arguments. Those familiar with the standard egalitarian vs. complementarian debates will find some of the ground well-trodden. For instance, Payne argues that:

- Genesis 1 gives man and woman equal responsibility for exercising dominion, and nothing in Genesis 2 overturns this.
- Male headship is a product of the fall.
- Deborah's story shows God is pleased when women lead God's people.
- Female prophets in the Bible prove the goodness of female leadership, for prophecy is a form of preaching and teaching.
- The excellent wife of Proverbs 31 leads her household, which suggests women are leaders in the home.
- Jesus encouraged women to be his disciples, and women like the Samaritan woman and Mary Magdalene had crucial ministries of teaching.
- Jesus chose male apostles only to avoid scandal and to show the church as the new Israel.
- The named women in Romans 16 are ministry leaders, especially Phoebe, Prisca, and Junia.
- The term *kephalē* means "source," not "authority" or "preeminence."
- Galatians 3:28 means that women must not be excluded from potential church leadership.

- A wife's submission to her husband in Ephesians 5:22–24 is relativized by the requirement for mutual submission in Ephesians 5:21.
- First Timothy 2:11–12 merely prohibits deceived women from teaching at Ephesus, not women from teaching in general.

In addition to these common arguments, Payne advances newer arguments from Titus 2 and 1 Peter 3. He suggests that Titus 2:1–8 doesn't differentiate believers but elders — older male elders, older female elders, and younger male elders. In 1 Peter 3:7, the word "likewise" means that husbands should submit to their wives just like wives should submit to their husbands.

APPRECIATION

While I remain unconvinced of Payne's overall thesis, I appreciate his commitment to biblical inerrancy, as stated at the outset of the book. While complementarians and egalitarians may debate what the biblical text means, it must always be the *biblical text* that is debated. We must go back to the biblical text and stand under its authority.

Also, Payne communicates clearly throughout the book, and his arguments are easy to follow. For example, he defines his terms at the outset, which include key concepts like hierarchy, complementarity, and equality (xxi–xxvi). While I disagree with his definition of equality — he defines it as "equal access to power" — his arguments were easier to understand because he clearly articulated his definitions.

I also appreciate how in each chapter Payne briefly analyzes the biblical data and then addresses common objections. Occasionally I would write an objection in the margin of his analysis, only to find

"Despite the book's strengths, his thesis fails to convince because he confuses gender hierarchy with equality, Christian leadership with Christian fellowship, and submission with humility."

that he addressed my objection later in the chapter. Even if I didn't find his answer compelling, I appreciated the attempt to answer the objection.

DISAGREEMENT

Despite the book's strengths, his thesis fails to convince because he confuses gender hierarchy with equality, Christian leadership with Christian fellowship, and submission with humility.

Payne considers all forms of gender hierarchy to be "favoritism" (xviii), and he defines equality as "equal access to power" (xxii). He denies differentiated, God-given roles to men and women in the home, church, and world, for such is inherently partiality. But gender equality in Scripture doesn't erase gender diversity, whether in the home, church, or world. Payne rightly emphasizes that men and women are equal, but he minimizes the God-ordained differences between men and women, which actually testify to their complementarity, not their inequality. Payne complains that gender "roles" is a modern notion, but actually the concept derives from a simple recognition that according to the Bible men and women are different.

Similarly, Payne confuses Christian leadership with Christian fellowship. In his analysis of Galatians 3:28, Payne says that the principle of unity in Christ means we should not exclude women from positions of leadership. He supports this by drawing a parallel to the Antioch incident, in which Peter excluded the Gentiles from table fellowship (Gal 2:11–14). If in Christ there is no more Jew or Greek, then Peter's behavior was no longer in step with the truth of the gospel (Gal 2:14). Payne rightly sees social ramifications as a necessary outflow of the gospel, but he confuses Christian leadership with Christian fellowship. The Antioch incident exhibits how the gospel undergirds Christian fellowship, not how the gospel provides every Christian with "equal access to power." A better application for Galatians 3:28 today would be that churches must not deny women from being baptized, becoming members of a local church, and partaking of the Lord's Supper. To exclude women from such Christian fellowship would be antithetical to the gospel and our unity in Christ. But this is distinct from Christian leadership. While Christian *fellowship* accents the *unity* of the church, Christian *leadership* derives from the *diversity* within the church.

Payne also confuses submission with humility. He says that Ephesians 5:21 "means that each person treats the other as more important than themselves," and that this passage "undergirds the nature of Christian leadership as humble service" (176). Certainly Christian leadership should be *humble*, but this doesn't mean Christian leadership *submits*. Indeed, every Christian should be humble and look to the interests of others, but this isn't what submission means. The Greek term for "submission" (*hypotassō*) inexorably involves hierarchy in which one follows or obeys an authority. Payne's failure to recognize the distinction between submission and humility keeps him from giving an adequate account of why Paul instructs wives to *submit* to their husbands and husbands to *love* their wives (Eph 5:22–33).

Finally, when it comes to the exegesis of the biblical texts, much could be said both for and against Payne's interpretations. Suffice it to say that the reader should remember the following key hermeneutical principles. First, the context must always determine the meaning of a text — for example, does the narrative arc of Judges really lead us to imitate the story of Deborah? Second, the text to interpret should be based on solid manuscript evidence — for example, is 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 plausibly a scribal addition if every extant manuscript includes it? Third, our conclusions must derive from what the text actually says — for example, if we agree from 1 Corinthians 11:11 "how important it is that women and men are not separate in the Lord" (71), does this suffice to overturn gender roles? In these three areas Payne's book suffers from unwarranted hermeneutical judgments.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood* adds to the growing list of books on the Bible's perspective on women and leadership. While it offers some helpful insights, Payne's overall thesis fails to convince. Christians will find firmer hermeneutical ground by making more careful distinctions and by more rigorously attending to the biblical text. For this reason, I cannot recommend this book for pastors or lay Christians. Of course, academic types may want to engage with Payne's work, though I wonder if his more extensive 2009 volume would contain more substance for scholarly engagement.

Joshua M. Greever is Associate Professor of New Testament at Bethlehem College and Seminary, Minneapolis, MN