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A Forum: Joe Rigney, Aaron M. Renn, Doug Ponder, Denny Burk

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Contents

Issue 2

4 AUTOTALITARIANISM: THE TYRANNY OF THE SELF
Jonathan E. Swan

12 THE NECESSITY OF A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF MAN
Stephen J. Wellum

20 MARRIED LOVE: LESSONS FROM SPURGEON'S LOVE POEM | ANCIENT PATHS
Geoff Chang

THE FUTURE OF COMPLEMENTARIANISM | A FORUM

26 — JOE RIGNEY
30 — AARON M. RENN
33 — DOUG PONDER
37 — DENNY BURK

42 GENDER IN DEEP HEAVEN
Kyle A. Dillon

60 ACCOMMODATION WITHOUT BRAKES: HOW THE PCUSA TRADED THEOLOGICAL ORTHODOXY FOR THE CULTURAL ZEITGEIST
Todd Pruitt

64 THE QUALIFICATIONS FOR ELDERS (1 TIMOTHY 3:1–7) | FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK
James M. Hamilton

70 ANTHROPOLOGY, ACTION, AND ATTRACTION: A CONSTRUCTIVE ACCOUNT AND CRITIQUE OF PRESTON SPRINKLE AND GREGORY COLE'S POSITION PAPER ON SAME-SEX ATTRACTION
Drew Sparks

97 MATTHEW VINES SAYS HE'S GAY, NOT QUEER. HE THINKS THIS MATTERS. SHOULD WE?
Rosaria Butterfield

102 THE NATURE OF A HUSBAND'S AUTHORITY
Jonathan Leeman

107 REVIVING THE AMERICAN FAMILY
Doug Richey

113 THE DELIGHT OF DIVINE DESIGN: COMPLEMENTARIANISM AND SERIOUS JOY
Jonathon D. Woodyard

BOOK REVIEWS

120 SONS OF ADAM, DAUGHTERS OF EVE: C. S. LEWIS'S IMAGES OF GENDER
Reviewed by Louis Markos

126 THE RECOVERY OF FAMILY LIFE: EXPOSING THE LIMITS OF MODERN IDEOLOGIES
Reviewed by Trent Hunter

134 WHEN IT'S TRAUMA: A BIBLICAL GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA AND WALKING FAITHFULLY WITH SUFFERERS
Reviewed by Shelbi Cullen

138 COMPLEMENTARIANISM: A CONTINUUM OF PERSPECTIVES ON MEN AND WOMEN IN THE CHURCH
Reviewed by Jared Mellinger

148 THE REDEEMED MAN
Reviewed by Drew Hunter



JONATHAN E. SWAN

Autotalit

the tyranny of the self

Modernity has done everything in its power to rid Western culture of religion, which ultimately means it has exhausted itself in uprooting the Christian pillars of our civilization. While operating on the assumption that religion is a psychological construct to be studied as a mere social phenomenon, the modernist assumed that man is inherently *irreligious*. And to the extent that man was intrinsically religious, his religiosity was deemed a liability to his judgement needing correction according to the enlightened dictates of human reason.

This demythologizing process has become the West's operating philosophy, leading to the rejection of the biblical idea that man was *created* by God and that God *speaks* to man. This rejection in the West's fundamental philosophy left man to find truth by his own light—whether by his own reason or empirical observations — if he was to find it at all. With God having long been removed from the equation — there was nothing left but for man to exalt himself.

The fool says there is no God

There is no doubt that the sages of modernity succeeded in convincing many that religion is an optional human experience, but in doing so they have unwittingly traded traditional religion for a new one — a religion of the self. Atheism, it turns out, is no atheism at all. For the modern man has simply replaced God's authority with his own. His worship, therefore, is not theistic in the traditional sense, but is directed inward towards himself — a kind of *Me*Theism. While the modern person may deny his own religiosity and thereby reject the notion there has been any sort of religious replacement — it has nevertheless occurred.

This replacement is inescapable because religion is inescapable. As John Calvin wrote, "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an

arianism:

awareness of divinity."[1] This awareness of God is evident, Calvin observed, in every culture:

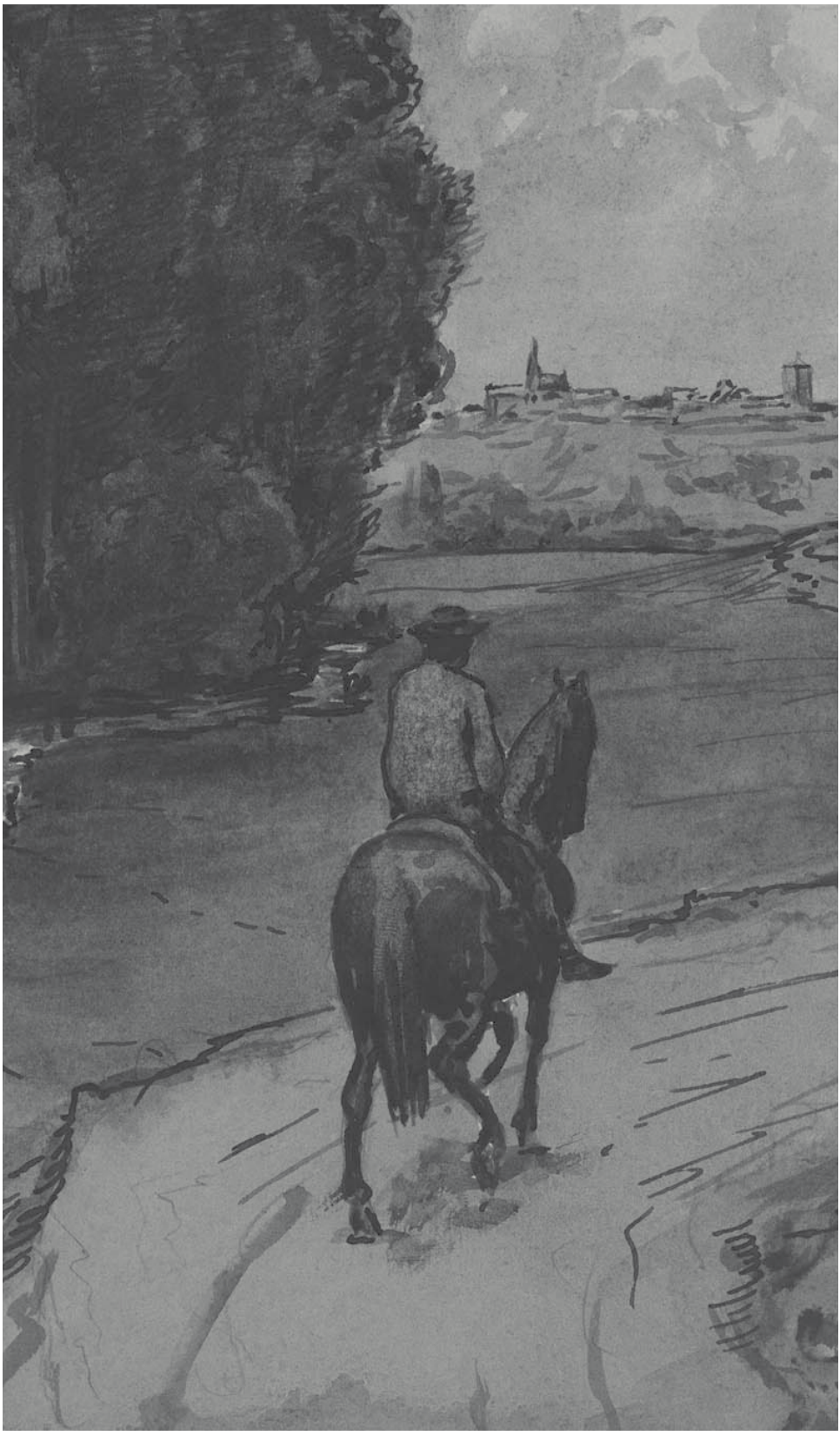
> Yet there is, as the eminent pagan [Cicero] says, no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep seated conviction that there is a God. And they who in other aspects of life seem least to differ from brutes still continue to retain some seed of religion. So deeply does the common conception occupy the minds of all, so tenaciously does it inhere in the hearts of all! Therefore, since from the beginning of the world there has been no region, no city, in short, no household, that could do without religion, there lies in this a tacit confession of a sense of deity inscribed in the hearts of all.[2]

Calvin was right, and not simply because his assertion passes the test of experience. The Apostle Paul grounds religiosity in the fact that God exists and man knows it. As Paul wrote to the Romans,

> For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal men and birds and animals and creeping things (Rom 1:21–23, ESV).

Mankind was created for communion with God. So when man refuses to worship the one for whom he was made, he directs his worship elsewhere. The Bible calls this *idolatry*. There is a great irony, however, in modernity's claim of atheism, which has led to the exaltation of the self. Paul charges those who exchange the worship of the Triune God for false gods with

[1] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 1559 translation ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 43 [1.3.1].
[2] Calvin, *Institutes*, 44 [1.3.1].



foolishness and futility. But modern man is doubly foolish, for not only does he not worship the one true God, he's deluded himself into thinking there is no God at all! But, in reality, he's put himself in the place of God. In doing so, he's become utterly futile and foolish in his thinking.

The autonomous self

Bereft of any divine (and therefore objective) source of truth and authority, man is left to define his own existence. While this sounds like freedom to modern ears, it turns out to be both destructive and tyrannical. Scripture teaches that man finds freedom and flourishing in obedience to God's revealed will, but finds enslavement, suffering, and death when following his own. Through submitting to Christ, man is set free from the penalty and power of sin to pursue righteousness that leads to blessedness. The blessed man, the psalmist says, delights in the law of the Lord and makes it his constant meditation. This man is like a tree planted near water, full of fruitfulness and life. But those who reject God's word are akin to wind-tossed chaff. Their end is destruction (Psa 1:2–4, 6).

But the religion of the self teaches a different doctrine — one that is new in some forms but in the end is the same teaching of the Garden serpent. The religion of the self catechizes in self-expression, self-affirmation, self-love, and self-care. It speaks of "your truth" and "my truth," both to insulate from criticism and to preserve self-esteem, but also because in the absence of a Creator there is no Truth. Consequently, we are each free to construct the world in our own image. In such a world, the good life is found through self-actualization — becoming who you most deeply feel and think yourself to be.

Thus, central to the religion of self is the ability to determine who and what we are. This self-definition pretends to be man's greatest freedom that leads to man's ultimate sense of fulfillment. To take away this ability for self-actualization would amount to a direct attack on human dignity as it would deprive individuals of their fundamental right to define their own existence.

This religion of the self has manifested itself and morphed through various phases, visible most particularly through the sexual revolution. To give but a brief outline, feminism's dismantling of gender roles supposedly liberated women's sense of self from "the "patriarchy," which had "enslaved" women to motherhood, homemaking, and various nurturing vocations. The gradual acceptance of free-range fornication set the self free from the religious boundaries of marriage that previously suppressed the self's gratification through sexual expression. And speaking of marriage, no-fault divorce helped husbands and wives more conveniently gain freedom from nuptial vows they no longer desired to fulfill.

Reproductive technologies and the widespread legalization of abortion further freed the self from the natural consequences of sexual intimacy. Via contraception, men and women were at liberty to have sex without a resulting progeny. With such freedom, sexual partners were no longer obliged to consider marriage as the exclusive context for sexuality, nor were they bound by the laws of nature which would — in the natural course of things — make them responsible for children. And, in the event that a child would be born, the woman's right to "bodily autonomy" — the autonomy of the *self* — demanded that she be able to kill ("abort") her child were it deemed to pose any inconvenience to the achievement of her self-fulfillment. In modernity, therefore, man is no longer subject to religious scruples, traditional institutions, and social obligation, but rises above them to pursue the authentic self.

The reign of the autonomous self came into full bloom with the arrival of so-called "same-sex marriage." This new le-

"This autotalitarianism — the tyranny of the self — enslaves people to their own desires and imaginations. The sovereign self turns out to be a hard task master."

gal definition of marriage legitimized homosexuality by standing athwart human history to free same-sex couples from the repressive and passé norms of "traditional" marriage.[3] Free from these imposed limitations, same-sex couples gained the liberty to fulfill their sexual and romantic desires in a government-recognized union. Protests to the contrary were a threat to this dignity-conferring freedom.

But the religion of the self reached its pinnacle with the widespread acceptance of transgenderism, which unshackled the individual from the hegemonic binaries that prevented true self-expression. In transgender theory, gender is a mere social construct, having no direct connection to one's sex. One's gender-identity is, then, inherently *subjective*. The result is that individuals are free to choose (for him*self*, her*self*, they*self*?) their gender, thereby assuming the individual authority to declare what a man or woman is. Thus the self is sovereign over gender. In the end, modern man has exalted the self as the sole determiner of what is good, true, and beautiful. And the self, according to his own subjective sense of these things, decides who and what he will be. The individual is therefore morally subject to no one but him*self*.

The tyrannical self

Despite the new religion's success in achieving societal acceptance, it has not and will not be able to make good on its promises. For its declaration of liberation and autonomy leads ironically to a particular form of tyranny. This *autotalitarianism* — the tyranny of the self — enslaves people to their own desires and imaginations. The sovereign self turns out to be a hard task master. Subject to its own whims and fancies, it is subjugated to its most base lusts, since the greatest good is found in actualizing one's longings and desires wherever they lead. The only brakes are internal, leaving no room for objective clarity and guardrails. As one's own reference point, man finds himself in an endless maze of self-creation and discovery. Left to the capriciousness of his feelings, the individual looks inward for direction. But his map is a labyrinth of ever-changing desire, discontentedness, and inner-conflict. Due to his rejection of divine revelation, the self, while sovereign, does not truly know *who* (or *whose*) he is. He also cannot even know *why* he exists, meaning he can't provide objective grounds for knowing his ultimate purpose in life — though he longs to know it.

[3] That is, *actual* marriage as opposed to so-called "same-sex marriage."

In this way the religion of the self is ultimately cruel. It promises freedom, but for what? Its self-revelational epistemology provides no foundations on which to build and no destination towards which to sail. Under these conditions the self is far from liberating, but is instead oppressive. It asks for bricks, but gives no straw. It demands to be happy but on its own cannot meet its own demand.

And our culture reflects this. We are chronically depressed, anxious, lonely, and suicidal. We are dependent on drugs — both illicit and pharmaceutical — addicted to alcohol, gambling, and sex. This turn to the self has destroyed the most fundamental institution for order and flourishing in society: marriage. The toll is incalculable. The wreckage of out-of-wedlock births, broken marriages, divided homes, and the impact on the children at the center of it all cannot easily be described. This is not to mention the human casualty of abortion. Those children, I grimly write, are the sacrifice made to the god of the autotalitarian self.

Autotalitarianism is not only a tyranny to the individual, but becomes totalized through cultural pressure and law. Individuals are subject to this autotalitarianism when socially compelled to comply with each other's declared sexual or gender identity. Failure to affirm another's identity is viewed as a bigoted denial of their dignity. In some instances, these denials are considered a form of *violence*. As such, the denial of another's self-concept cannot be left as mere differences of opinion to be respected on both sides. Instead, they must be construed as acts of illegal discrimination. Compliance to the dictates of the autonomous self, then, are matters to be enforced by law.[4]

Nevertheless, autotalitarianism is first a tyranny within the individual before it is enforced through culture and law. And theologically speaking, it is first and foremost a reign of sin in the individual. Scripture speaks of sin in this way as slavery, the most comprehensive and brutal sort of tyranny, from which we are set free through faith in Christ. The Apostle Paul writes,

> Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will not have dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace (Rom 6:12–14).

Whereas Paul calls the believer to pursue righteousness by the Spirit according to his newfound freedom in Christ, the autonomous self lets sin reign in his body, making him subject to "obey its passions." The autotalitarian lives under the dominion of sin, rather than the dominion of Christ. And this dominion is cruel, because it directs man away from his Creator and causes him to look inward into his own sinful and deceiving heart for answers to life's deepest questions. But as the prophet Jeremiah writes, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer 17:9). To look into one's own heart for answers is to stare into the abyss.

Ultimately, autotalitarianism's end is death (Rom 6:23). It is a destructive reign built on a deceptive but enticing lie — that you can be god and that your will is authoritative.[5] But, as Genesis 3 reminds

[4] Many such laws are on the book in various states, colloquially called SOGI laws ("sexual orientation and gender identity").
[5] This is a basic antithesis between Christianity and its alternatives, as Cornelius Van Til recognized: "Over against this Christian view of the will of God as ultimate is the non-Christian view of the will of man as ultimate. Morality is assumed to be autonomous. Man is virtually said to be a law unto himself." Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd Ed. (Phillipburg,

us, such a temptation is always a lie, and a fatal one. Earthly blessedness and eternal salvation cannot be found by looking within — but without.

A revealed anthropology

That is why at CBMW we look to God and his authoritative self-revelation. We recognize that we are not our own, but belong to him. He created us, forming us with careful design and wise purposes. Rejecting the idea that our will is ultimate, we rely on the will of God as expressed in Scripture and nature. So while the world seeks a true north from within, we declare God's Word as the only infallible and unchanging rule of faith. And as we look out on our culture's rejection of God and his Word, we are not surprised to see chaos and destruction. We do not expect to find flourishing people among those who forsake God and his plans and live only according to their own.

One of the great ironies of the autonomous self is that it turns out not to be so autonomous, but highly malleable and subject to manipulation. Claiming to be autonomous, modern man has become enslaved, exchanging the truth of his nature for ideological denials of it. The sudden rise and decline of LGBT-identification in recent years demonstrates just how the turn inward leaves one open to the seduction of online influencers. These viral social trends did not "free" anyone, it chained them to the algorithm.[6] Tragically, in the pursuit of discovering their authentic self, millions of people bought at full price a host of Satanic delusions, invented out of whole cloth by philosophical charlatans hell bent on rebelling against God.

At *Eikon*, we seek a biblical anthropology, not the anthropology of the universi-



NJ: P&R, 2003), 36.

[6] This is a play on the title to a song by Katy Perry, "Chained to the Rhythm."



ty sophists who are always learning but never to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. Nor do we seek the anthropology of the latest social media contagion, of the entertainment industry, or the credentialed bureaucrat. Instead, we seek the only anthropological truth — truth that is anchored in the inerrant and inspired Word of God, in whose image we are made.

Jonatha E. Swan is Executive Editor of Eikon

STEPHEN J. WELLUM

The Necessity of a Christian View of Man



The age-old question — What is man? — has become urgent today. No doubt, people in every era have asked it, but currently, especially in the West, this question now consumes us.

The loss of the influence of the Christian worldview in the West represents the main reason for this preoccupation. Prior to the seventeenth century, Christian theology largely influenced and shaped our society, but due to Enlightenment, modernism, and now postmodernism, this is no longer the case. The result is that our culture is now in an identity crisis of gigantic proportions.

What has also made our identity crisis more acute is the development of various technologies alongside these worldview changes. What we once viewed as "natural" has now changed with our ability to "remake" humans. In a day of test-tube babies, transgender operations, genetic engineering, and artificial intelligence, our society questions whether there is anything "natural" about us. No longer are humans viewed as created, designed, and ordered; instead, we are viewed as malleable beings who determine our "identities" solely by our own subjectivity. No wonder we are confused about who we are.

This is an important time for Christians for several reasons. First, we have a unique opportunity to speak the truth of God's word to our world given its confusion regarding who we are. Second, evaluating competing views of humans also has significant practical consequences since it affects *every* area of thought and life. For instance, how one analyzes the



nature of humans, what our problem is, and what we think the remedy is to our problem, directly impacts political, economic, education theories, and much more. Third, what we think humans are directly affects how we treat one another, order a society, educate people, as well as the goals and aims we have for human societies. The disagreement today we see among political parties on such moral issues as abortion and human sexuality is over competing views of humans, something Christians must address.

So given the pressing need for Christians to bring the truth of God's word to bear on these issues, let me proceed in two steps. First, I will underscore the truth that our current identity crisis is directly due to our rejection of a Christian view of humans and an embrace of various non-Christian views, resulting in disastrous consequences. Second, I will remind the church that we need to recover a Christian view of humans as the only hope for the lostness of our society and most significantly for the glory of our triune God.

WHAT IS MAN? DIGNIFIED CREATURES OR GROWN-UP BEASTS?

One's answer to this question is directly tied to one's worldview. For example, when David asks — What is man? (Ps 8:4a) — his answer is quite different from the answers given today. David answers the question in terms of humanity's creaturely and image-bearing status before God (Ps 8:1–3, 5–9). In Scripture, unlike our society, humans have significance precisely because we are *created* in God's image. But for our society, the question of whether humans are intrinsically valuable is not a given, hence why our society is fixated on the questions of "estrangement" and "meaninglessness," rather than human dignity and value.

Why are the answers so different? In fact, in the West, it wasn't always so. In the West, given the influence of Christianity, humans were viewed in more biblical categories. But this all changed with the rise of the Enlightenment that witnessed a worldview shift away from Christian theology in at least two significant areas. First, the Enlightenment rejected a revelational epistemology for human rational autonomy. Humans were no longer viewed "from above" (i.e., from what God revealed about us in Scripture) but "from below" (i.e., from the standpoint of finite, fallen, human perspectives independent of Scripture). Second, there was a corresponding rejection of trinitarian theism, first for deism and then evolutionary naturalism, which greatly affected how we think about human origins, design, and purpose.

At least two consequences resulted from these two shifts in thinking. First, the West witnessed a rise of competing views against Christianity, largely indebted to evolutionary naturalism now combined with a secular-postmodern perspective. Second, with the rise of these competing "isms" (e.g., secular humanism, Marxism, existentialism, nihilism, deconstructionism), our culture necessarily embraced competing ideas of what humans are, which resulted in not only a devaluation of humans but a growing confusion, despair, meaninglessness, and dystopian visions of reality. Sadly, as the West turned away from Christian theology and embraced contrary views, it has sought to explain who and what humans are solely "from below," i.e., in terms of biology, chemistry, physics, and the social sciences — all framed within the confines and limits of evolutionary and methodological naturalism.

Not surprisingly, Alexander Pope's method for the study of man is now the norm: "Know then thyself, presume not God to



scan; The proper study of Mankind is Man."[1] Yet in seeking to "liberate" ourselves from God and divine revelation, disaster has occurred. As Cornelius Van Til often taught: our attempt to understand ourselves "from below" is analogous to what happened to the prodigal son. The prodigal son could only live "free" of his father until his money ran out. But once his money ran out, he had to return to his father because he could not function apart from him. In a similar way, humans can only follow the advice of Alexander Pope if they continue to live off the borrowed capital of Christianity, but once we jettison the Christian view, we soon discover that the warrant for our own dignity, value, and purpose evaporates.

This is precisely what happened in the West. Instead of viewing ourselves as created by God, we sought to understand ourselves in terms of an impersonal, blind evolutionary process. But if people remained true to this naturalistic worldview, it meant we could no longer view ourselves as creatures of dignity but instead only evolved beasts. Gradually we began to admit that humans are not creatures of value created by God but only products of *impersonal* causes. For a while, people continued to affirm human dignity, along with human rights, yet also denying that these truths are directly dependent on a Christian worldview. But as people sought to remain consistent with their secular-postmodern view, they ran out of money. In its place, humans were viewed solely as animals, the product of the impersonal plus time plus chance. As Paul reminds us in Romans 1, in refusing to acknowledge our Creator, we explained ourselves solely in terms of created things. But the disastrous consequence of such a move is that the metaphysical and epistemological grounding for human value, purpose, meaning, design, reason, love, freedom, justice, etc. is now gone. Sad-

[1] Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Man," in *Poetical Works*, ed. H. F. Cary (London: Routledge, 1870), 225.

ly, such truths not only vanish from our thinking, but we also begin to live out their tragic loss in our lives.

For example, think of the tragic loss of human dignity today. Apart from a Christian view of humans, there is no objective warrant for human dignity and value, which is not only admitted but also sadly acted on. For instance, Robert Haynes, the president of the 16th International Congress of Genetics says this: "For three thousand years at least, a majority of people have considered that human beings were special, were magic. It's the Judeo-Christian view of man. What the ability to manipulate genes should indicate to people is the very deep extent to which we are biological machines. The traditional view is built on the foundation that life is sacred… Well, not anymore. It's no longer possible to live by the idea that there is something special, unique, even sacred about living organism."[2]

But where does this lead us? Tragically, it has led to the slaughter of humans in multiple wars, countless abortions, infanticide, euthanasia, suicide, and the list goes on. In the twentieth century, millions of people were slaughtered on the altar of secular-naturalistic views of humans. Yet, it does not stop here. We also see the tragic loss of human dignity in the breakdown of the family, gender confusion, and our society's determination to destroy marriage and the family as the basic building block of human society. The modern downgrade of human dignity is also evident in our increased suicide rates, which reflects a general despair about the meaning and the purpose of human life — another tragic consequence of rejecting a Christian view of humans.

Alongside the loss of human dignity is also the loss of moral categories. With our rejection of God as our transcendent reference point, we have undercut the basis for objective moral norms, and with it, the warrant for an objective standard of justice. What has replaced it is the subjective construction of finite, fallen humans, which in the end has led to the State taking the place of God and arbitrarily determining moral law — a terrifying thought. This is why we are witnessing a growing totalitarianism in the West. In a postmodern society, power is now placed in the hands of relativists, who in turn attempt to make themselves God. Instead of *lex rex* (God's law over the king), postmodern societies deify the State. Mark it well: all societies are religiously grounded: there is no "naked public square." Either the true and living God will rule over us, or humans will attempt to elevate themselves to the place of God, which always results in tyranny. The tragic irony of the secular-postmodern view of humans is that instead of "liberating" us, it has resulted in nothing but enslavement.

A generation ago, Francis Schaeffer warned us about this. He knew that with the rejection of a Christian view of God, self, and the world the end result is always statism, which seeks to repristinate Babel all over again. In our foolish attempt to dethrone God, we enthrone man. But given that humans are finite and fallen it is an awful substitute.

THE NEED FOR A THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

In the midst of our current identity crisis, there is an important lesson for Christians to learn. We will never truly understand who we are apart from a *theological* anthropology. The question — "What is man?" — can only be answered in terms of the triune God and his divine revelation telling us who and what we are.

[2] Andrew Kimbrell, *The Human Body Shop* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 233–34.

John Calvin stands in antithesis to Alexander Pope. As Calvin begins his *Institutes*, he makes a profound statement: "Without the knowledge of God there is no knowledge of the self.[3] In other words, we will never know who we are unless we view ourselves in relation to our Creator and Lord. Apart from doing so, mankind is left to disastrous confusion. In the end, non-Christian views of humans are incoherent and self-refuting. They are incoherent in explaining who we are in terms of our value, dignity, and significance, let alone what is wrong with us in terms of our sin. The church has a unique opportunity to speak the truth in love and to do so with courage since it's the Christian worldview alone that provides the metaphysical and epistemological ground to uphold human dignity, along with what is truly wrong with us in terms of our sin. Our society cannot make sense of either, which has led to the mess we witness on a daily basis.

Although much could be said in terms of the specifics of a theological anthropology, Christians must minimally affirm two key truths. First, humans are unique because we are created in God's image. Scripture explains us in relation to a personal beginning (Gen 1:1), namely the triune God, who has created us in an ordered, designed, and purposeful way, and as such, we are creatures of dignity and not evolved beasts. Second, given the fall, we who were created great are now *moral* rebels before God and deeply flawed by sin. We who were created to know God and to rule as vice-regents over the world have turned against our Creator, which has brought ruin into the world and destroyed everything in our path. Yet our flaw is not due to our creation but our willful rebellion against God. This is why the only solution to our problem is the sovereign and gracious initiative of God on our behalf. Sin does not belong to our essence. We remain God's image, but now morally corrupt and spiritually dead. But thankfully, by God's grace and action, sin can be paid for by Christ's work and applied to us by the Spirit who transforms us into Christ's image.

This Christian anthropology is what is needed in our day as the antidote to the dust of death that non-Christian views have brought. But will the church have courage to stand against the foolish ideas of our age and to recover the truth of God's word without compromise? Will we have the courage to live out the truth of who we are in all our dignity and fallenness, and to uphold the value of human life, human sexuality, marriage and the family, in a day that stands in direct opposition to the truth of Scripture? Will we have the courage to stand against the rising totalitarianism of our age and to live as a counterculture as we display to the world what it truly means to be human? And will we proclaim Christ Jesus as Lord as the only hope for this fallen human race that so desperately needs to hear the truth of God's word in all of its beauty, depth, and fullness?

Stephen J. Wellum is Editor of The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology, Professor of Christian Theology, and an elder at Providence Baptist Church, Sellersburg, Indiana. He has authored numerous books and articles, including Systematic Theology: From Canon to Concept.

[3] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I.1.2 (1:37).



GEOFFREY CHANG

Married Love:

Lessons from Spurgeon's Love Poem

In the October 1865 issue of *The Sword and the Trowel,* Charles Spurgeon published a piece that may well have raised some eyebrows among his readers. The purpose of the monthly magazine was evident in its name: to battle error with the sword of the Spirit and to build up the church in the truth. But in this month, tucked between the evangelistic tracts and church planting updates, Charles included a personal love poem to his wife Susie, with this title and ascription, "Married Love. To My Wife… Hull, Sep. 1865. C. H. Spurgeon."[1]

Victorians were shaped by the Romanticism of their day, and Charles was no different. Love poems were regularly published in Christian periodicals aimed at a broader audience. But for the most famous preacher of the day to publish a love poem addressed to his wife in his ministerial magazine was unique. Why did he take a poem that he had privately written to his wife and publish it for all to see? Clues can be found in the poem itself.

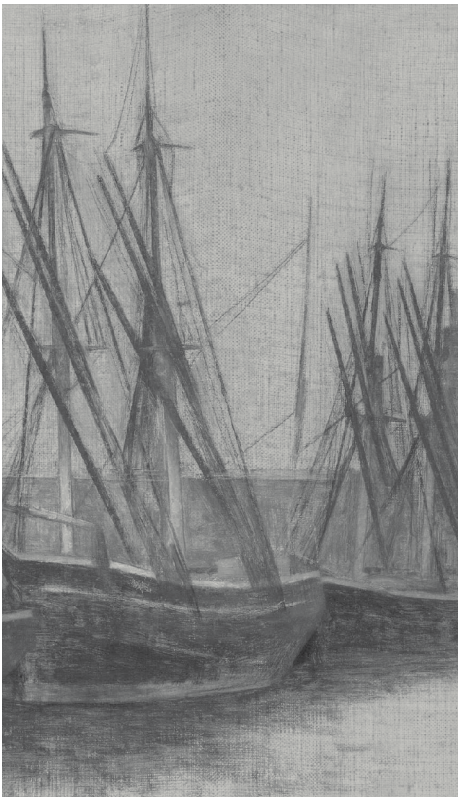
SEPARATION

Over the space which parts us, my wife,
I'll cast me a bridge of song,
Our hearts shall meet, O joy of my life,
On its arch unseen but strong.

E'en as the stream forgets not the sea,
But hastes to the ocean's breast,
My constant soul flows onward to thee
And finds in thy love its rest.

The swallows must plume their wings to greet
New summers in lands afar;
But dwelling at home with thee I meet
No winter my year to mar.

[1] C. H. Spurgeon, ed., *The Sword and the Trowel; A Record of Combat with Sin & Labour for the Lord* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1865), 460.



Susie received this poem on a happy morning in September of 1865. Charles was away on one of his many preaching engagements and had written this poem to her from Hull.[2] He may well have been on the banks of the River Hull or the Humber Estuary, watching the water flow out to the North Sea, as he wrote, "My constant soul flows onward to thee / And finds in thy love its rest." For the first ten years of their marriage, Susie had been able to travel with her husband, and she counted it her joy and privilege to accompany him on many of his preaching journeys and holiday retreats. But starting in 1865, Susie began to face serious health challenges, which limited her travel and prevented her from accompanying Charles on this particular trip.[3] By 1868, her traveling days were over.[4]

In the coming decades, Charles would continue to travel for work, and his own health challenges would require him to leave London during cold winter months; but Susie would no longer be able to accompany her husband. Each year, they would find themselves apart for weeks or even months at a time, and this was a severe trial for the couple. Susie writes, "These separations were very painful to hearts so tenderly united as were ours, but we each bore our share of the sorrow as heroically as we could, and softened it as far as possible by constant correspondence."[5] As Charles wrote these lines from Hull, he assured Susie that their love was greater than the distance that separated them. Though he often had to travel like the swallows in search of warmer weather, his true home was always with his wife.

LOVE

The wooer his new love's name may wear
Engraved on a precious stone;
But in my heart thine image I wear,
That heart has been long thine own.

The glowing colours on surface laid,
Wash out in a shower of rain,
Thou need'st not be of rivers afraid,
For my love is dyed ingrain.

And as ev'ry drop of Garda's lake
Is tinged with the sapphire's blue
So all the powers of my mind partake
Of joy at the thought of you.

The glittering dewdrops of dawning love

[2] C. H. Spurgeon, *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography Compiled from His Diary, Letters, and Records by His Wife, and His Private Secretary.* Vol. 2 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1898), 297–298. For a facsimile of the handwritten poem Susie received, see Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, Vol. 2, 298–299.
[3] Spurgeon, *Autobiography,* Vol. 2, 291-292.
[4] C. H. Spurgeon, *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography Compiled from His Diary, Letters, and Records by His Wife, and His Private Secretary.* Vol. 3 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1899), 203. Susie was able to accompany Charles on his last trip to Mentone, France in the fall of 1891. He died in January 1892.
[5] Spurgeon, *C.H. Spurgeon's Autobiography*, 203.

Exhale as the day grows old,
And fondness, taking the wings of a dove
Is gone like a tale of old;

But mine for thee from the chambers of joy,
With strength came forth as the sun,
Nor life nor death shall its force destroy,
For ever its course shall run.

How will Charles, the famous preacher, describe his love for his wife? He will borrow imagery from the Bible. As God has engraved his people on the palms of his hand (Isa 49:16), so is Susie's image engraved upon Charles's heart. Though painted surfaces are easily washed away, rivers cannot wash away his love (Song 8:6–7). His love for her is not a vanishing dew, or a fleeting dove, but is like the indomitable sun that "for ever its course shall run" (Psa 19:4–6).

Between these four stanzas, he includes a reference to Lake Garda, in Italy. Charles and Susie had seen those sapphire blue waters earlier that year, during their vacation on the European continent from May to July of 1865. Even as Spurgeon was away and busy, his thoughts returned continuously to his wife, to all the sweet times they had together, and he found comfort in those memories. Their married love was not merely poetic imagery but was grounded in real life and affection for each other.

AN ETERNAL BOND

All earthborn love must sleep in the grave,
To its native dust return;



What God hath kindled shall death
outbrave,
And in Heav'n itself shall burn.

Beyond and above the wedlock tie
Our union to Christ we feel,
Uniting bonds which were made on
high
Shall hold us when earth shall reel.

Though he who chose us all worlds
before,
Must reign in our hearts alone,
We fondly believe that we shall adore,
Together before his throne.

In these closing stanzas, Charles glories in the fact that their love will endure even beyond death. But did not Jesus teach that there is no marriage at the resurrection (Matt 22:30)? Yes, he did, and Charles knew this well. In heaven, "the wedlock tie" will come to an end, but for the Christian husband and wife, there is a heavenly bond that will continue for eternity, namely "our union to Christ." These are the "uniting bonds which were made on high" and which "shall hold us when earth shall reel." As he had taught his congregation about heaven just a few months ago, "for though they are not married nor given in marriage, though natural relations are all over, yet spiritual relations last for ever."[6] There, "together before His throne," their love for one another will not be less than it was on earth, but will be more. Indeed, that love will be perfected in their mutual adoration of Christ. In their separation, Charles closes with a comforting emphasis: "*Together* before his throne."

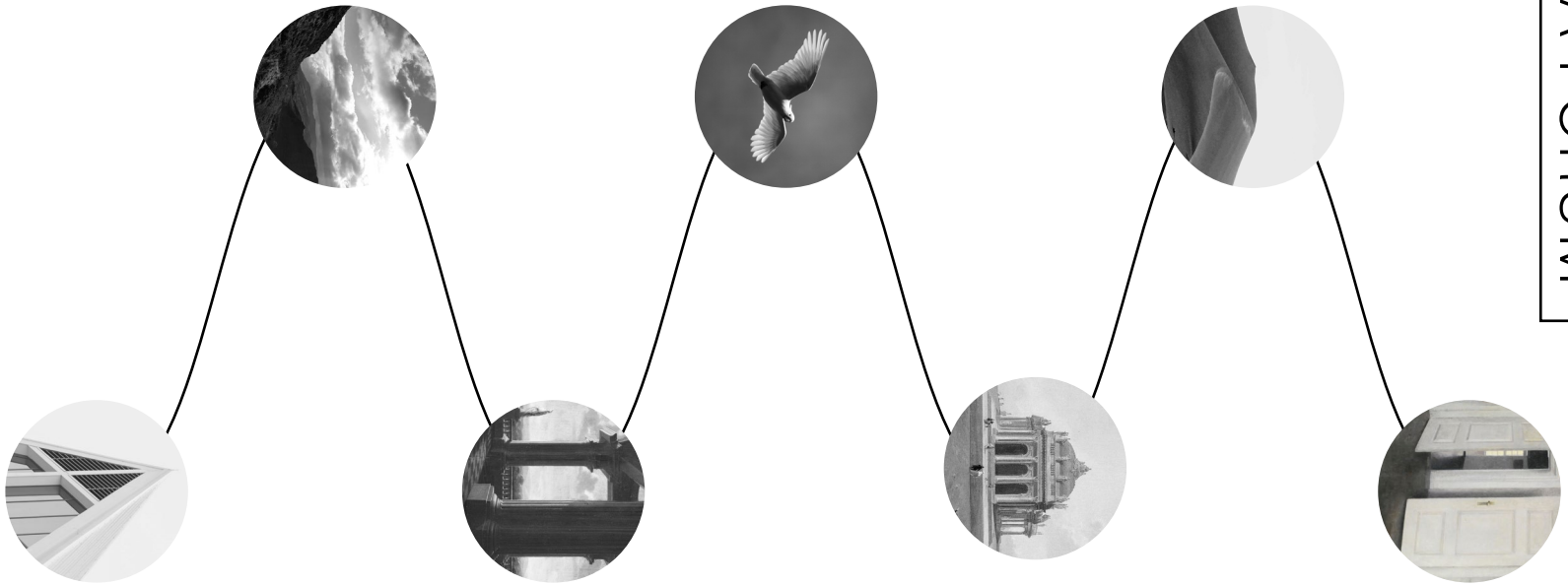
CONCLUSION

Why did Spurgeon write this poem? He wrote it because he loved his wife, and he wanted to express that love. When compiling her husband's *Autobiography*, Susie came across this poem and wrote, "None can be expected to feel the same rapturous delight in the sweet verses as I did when I first read them; I was far more proud of them than I should have been of chains of gold or strings of pearls; and they have still the power to move my soul to an overwhelming tenderness both of memory and anticipation."[7] Six years had passed since Charles died. Susie missed her husband, but she knew that this separation would one day end and anticipated when they would be *together* again.

But why did Spurgeon *publish* this poem? We don't ultimately know, but as a pastor of pastors, surely he hoped that there might be something instructive in it for his readers. For pastors who must travel as part of their work, Spurgeon is a good example of making the most of the longing that distance produces. Write love letters. Compose poems. Maintain "constant correspondence." Express your love in ways that will last long after you're gone. In publishing the poem, Spurgeon also understood the public nature of his ministry and his marriage. In the way a pastor loves his wife, speaks about her, and demonstrates his affection, he is setting an example for other couples in the church of what healthy married love should look like. Pastors, set a high bar for the other husbands in your church. And finally, marriage is always an opportunity to point others to Christ. Even in this love poem, Spurgeon does not make his love for Susie ultimate, but Christ's love for all his people. This is the love to which all married love should point.

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[6] C. H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit,* Vol. 11 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1865), 431. This sermon was preached on July 30, 1865.
[7] Spurgeon, *Autobiography,* Vol. 2, 297–298.

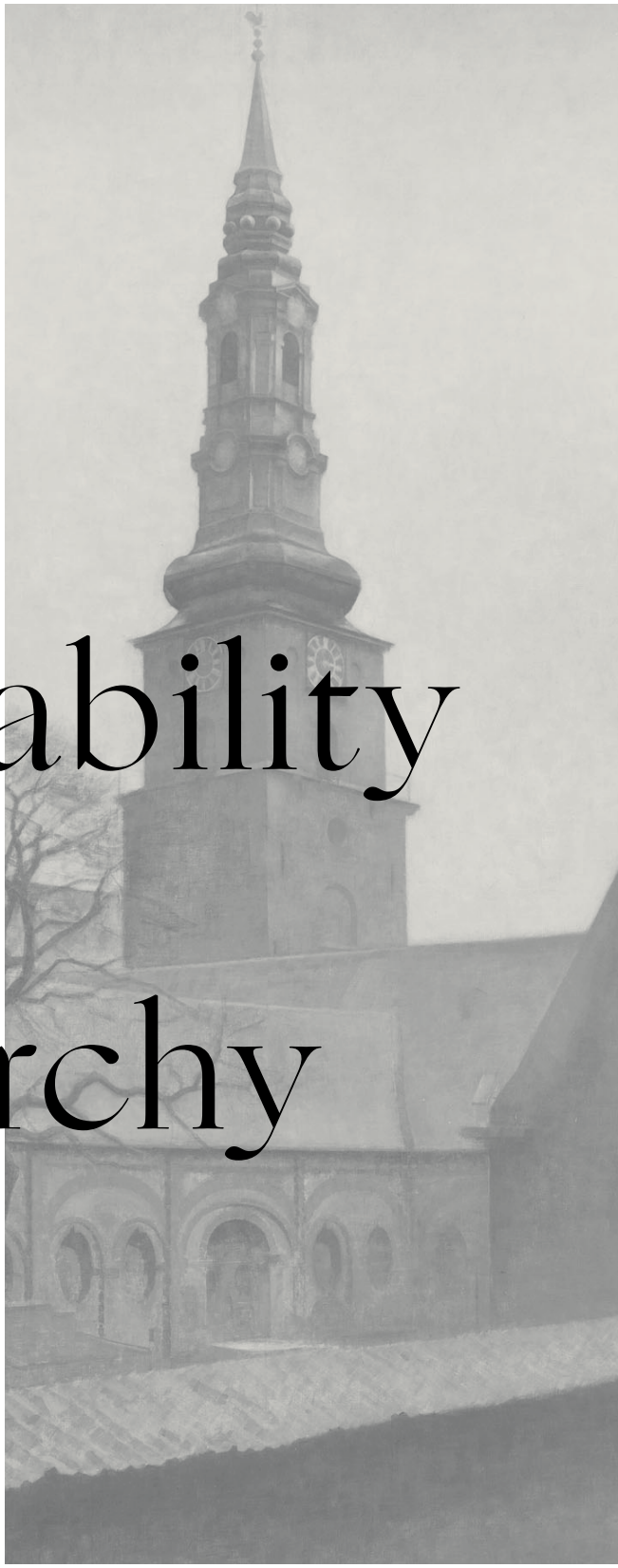


The Future of Complementarianism



JOE RIGNEY

The Inevitability of Patriarchy



When I was younger, I described myself as a complementarian, but was willing to be called a patriarchalist. Now I commend biblical patriarchy, but I'm willing to be called a complementarian in the right contexts. It's from that perspective that I address the question of complementarianism's future.

Complementarianism is the belief that men and women are equal in being, dignity, and value, but distinct and complementary in role and responsibility. The Danvers Statement (1988) establishes the basic convictions of complementarians. The Nashville Statement (2017) might be thought of as an extension and application of complementarian principles to new challenges (such as transgenderism), but it also revealed fault lines within the camp between what came to be called "thin/soft complementarians" and "thick/hard complementarians."

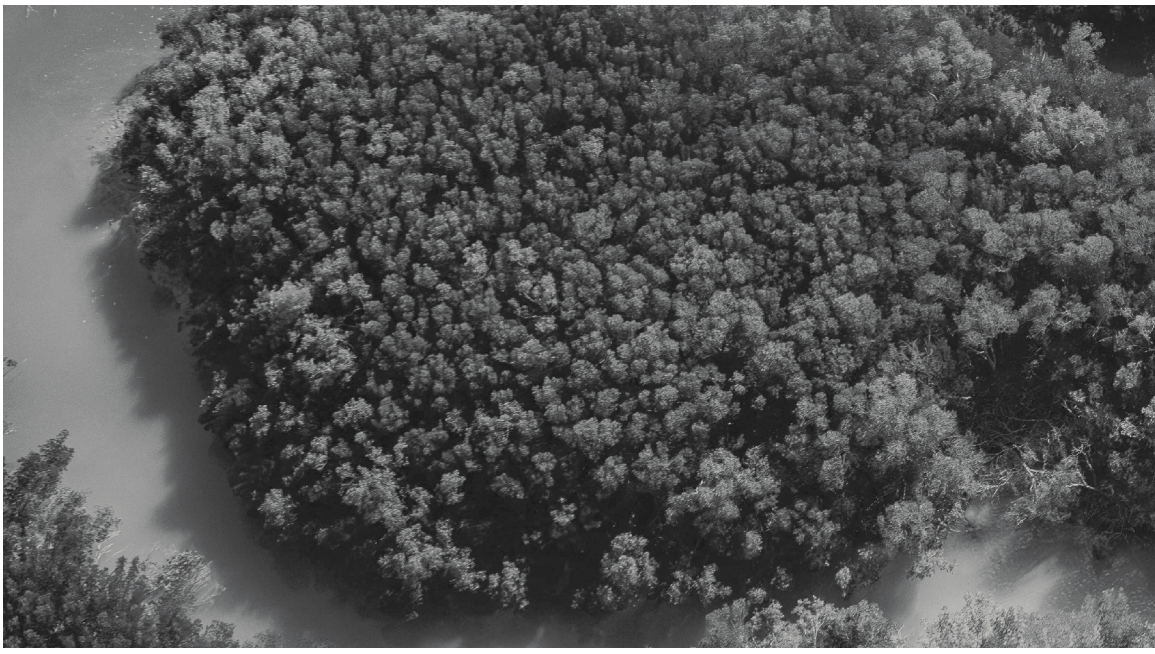
The term was coined in the 1980s as a way of recovering the biblical teaching on manhood and womanhood. In that sense, complementarianism claimed to reflect the traditional biblical teaching in the face of modern feminism. At the same time, complementarians were keen to differentiate in two different directions, not just one. On the one hand, they rejected novel egalitarian interpretations of the biblical text. But they were also keen to differentiate from "hierarchicalist" views of the relation between men and women. This two-fold differentiation frequently led to a "third way" rhetorical positioning between egalitarianism on one side and patriarchy on the other.

Complementarianism's origin story leaves it susceptible to a number of weaknesses. First, because the occasion for the recovery was the rise of egalitarianism in evangelical denominations, it is often sensitive to egalitarian critiques of traditional churches and will at times accept the egalitarian framing of patriarchal societies as systematically oppressive. The "Third Way" rhetorical positioning lends itself to emphasizing *equal and opposite dangers* on each side, rather than rhetorically pressing on the true threat. For while there are abusive patriarchal societies in the world (such as those in traditional Islamic nations), the overwhelming threat to biblical manhood and womanhood in the West is egalitarianism and feminism.

Second, because early complementarians were primarily animated by issues affecting the home and church, there was less interest, energy, and unity when it came to applying their convictions to society as a whole. This gap leaves complementarians divided when it comes to addressing wider culture issues. It also lends itself to the cultivation of complementarian ghettos in the midst of a "longhoused" society.

Finally, the combination of the neologism "complementarianism" and the emphasis on *biblical* manhood and womanhood

"In the long run, patriarchy is inevitable and unavoidable. It will either be a faithful and biblical patriarchy, a tyrannical patriarchy (such as found in Islam), or a sniveling patriarchy steered and manipulated by the Longhouse."



runs the risk of turning complementarianism into an ideology imposed upon nature, rather than a biblical stewardship of nature. As evidence for this danger, many "soft complementarians" have effectively adopted a modern egalitarian anthropology and resist the full slide into feminism only because of a handful of verses in Paul's letters.

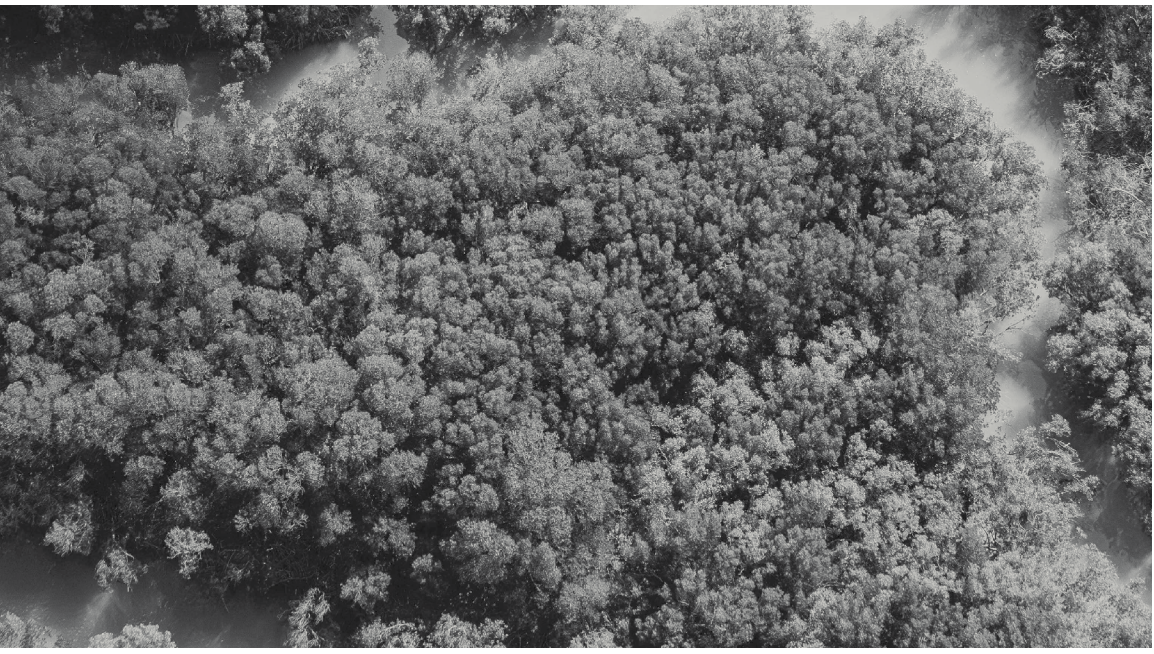
In light of this history and these dangers, what is the way forward? First, we must continue to underscore that Scripture and nature speak with one voice.[1] The facts of creation revealed in Scripture give rise to facts of nature evident to all men (though suppressed in unrighteousness, like many aspects of God's revelation).

More than that, we must cheerfully and forthrightly assert that, biblically speaking, male headship is a fact, not a command. It's an indicative, not an imperative.[2] This fact is manifest first in the home, then in the church by divine law, and then in society as a normal and natural outworking of God's design in creation. In the long run, patriarchy is inevitable and unavoidable. It will either be a faithful and biblical patriarchy, a tyrannical patriarchy (such as found in Islam), or a sniveling patriarchy steered and manipulated by the Longhouse. Even our present egalitarian society shows the marks of a demented patriarchy, as feminism reaches its terminus in the trans-insanity, in which sinful and toxic female empathy[3] leads to civilizational suicide.

Second, as we preach Scripture and point to nature, we must assume the center. No defensive crouch that flinches in the face of feminist fury. Complementarians must unapologetically and publicly embrace that a society ruled by women is fundamentally sick. Indeed, Scripture asserts that female rule is a sign of divine judgment (Isa 3:12).

And we must do both of these in the face of feminist lies. There's the accusation, com-

[1] Joe Rigney, "With One Voice: Scripture and Nature for Ethics and Discipleship," *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 1.1 (Spring 2019): 26–37.
[2] Joe Rigney, "Indicatives, Imperatives, and Applications: Reflections on Natural, Biblical, and Cultural Complementarianism," *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 4.1 (Spring 2022): 28–36.
[3] Joe Rigney, *Leadership and The Sin of Empathy: Compassion and Its Counterfeits: A Christian Guide to Discernment, Emotional Manipulation, Boundaries and False Compassion* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2025).



plete with actors playing dress-up, that we want to enact *The Handmaid's Tale*, that we want our wives to be barefoot, pregnant in the kitchen, making sourdough. Of course, this is a gross slander. We are more than happy for our wives to wear shoes as they make the sourdough.

But more than this, many of the accusations are a type of confession. The only people today who want to turn women into incubators are those who celebrate homosexuals renting wombs from vulnerable women and purchasing babies via unregulated surrogacy.

Third, complementarians must stop catering to women as an interest group to be placated. Too many ostensibly complementarian churches are filled with constant pressure and agitation to get more women "up front" or "in the room where it happens." The push for "functional female officers," whether among Presbyterians or Baptists, is a sign of how far the feminist rot has spread.

Instead, we must cultivate Christian communities where no such pressure exists, because women are too busy doing the glorious, glad-hearted, and meaningful work of making a productive household. Indeed, the recovery of the fruitful household is one of the central needs of Western Civilization, and those who gladly embrace male headship must also celebrate that Woman is the glory of Man, and that central to that glory is the bearing and raising of children, as well as knitting communities together with her hospitality, wisdom, and service.

Male headship is inevitable. So is female gloryhood. Men will rule, either as noble princes or wicked tyrants. Society will elevate women, either as prostitutes and celebrities, or as wives and mothers. Whether you call it complementarianism or patriarchy, this is the world that God made and that Christ is redeeming. May the Spirit give us the grace to live faithfully within it.

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AARON M. RENN

A New Third Way



Complementarianism is a theology that will pass along with the Boomers who championed and helped create it.

To unpack that, we must first say what complementarianism is. Some say that it is merely the belief that God has ordained separate roles for men and women in the home and the church, and thus belongs to a theological tradition as old as the church. Others might point to the Danvers Statement, the 1987 confessional document issued by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood.

But complementarianism as understood and practiced today is best seen as a new, third way, biblicist response to Second Wave Feminism, one that was developed during the 1970s through to the early 1990s.

The developers of complementarianism themselves saw it as a response to Second Wave Feminism. The primary book expounding it was *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (RBMW), published in 1991 and edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem. It was subtitled *A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. In his own telling, Grudem describes getting interested in gender theology through word studies rebutting the feminist interpretation of the Greek word *kephalē*, usually translated as "head."[1]

It also described itself as a third way position. In addition to rejecting evangelical feminism, which affirmed egalitarian gender roles, its creators also explicitly rejected the American gender roles and theology of the pre-feminist era. Piper wrote in RBMW, "Our vision is not entirely the same as 'a traditional view.' We affirm that the evangelical feminist movement has pointed out many selfish and hurtful practices that have previously gone unquestioned." Tim and Kathy Keller, among the most widely influential complementarians, wrote in a white paper on women in ministry, "The biblical pattern of headship is neither the traditional nor the feminist."[2]

Whether intentionally or not, this third way approach applied a biblicist method. Because various Bible passages speak specifically to a male only pastorate and the husband as the head of the wife, these roles were affirmed. But complementarianism spoke very little about related areas beyond that. The Danvers Statement, for example, dealt explicitly only with these two issues, and otherwise stressed the equality of men and women before God and as being created in the image of God.

As a result, the Danvers Statement, and complementarianism generally, were anthropologically light. That is to say, while acknowledging differences between men and women, complementarianism speaks much more about what those differences are not than what they are. RBMW says, "Men and women as God created them are different in hundreds of ways." Ok, but what are those differences? The book doesn't tell us. By contrast, various complementarians have repeatedly provided examples of cases where women are superior to men as to what seem to be obvious qualifications for a particular role. The Kellers explicitly denied that the Bible says men are better equipped by nature for leadership in the home.[3] The ordinary evangelical might be justified in concluding that complementarian authorities intend to say that God did not create men as more suitable to certain roles by nature, but merely assigned them by fiat.

This biblicist, anthropology-lite approach leads to a default assumption that whatever roles not explicitly barred to women by Scripture are permitted. Kathy Keller formulated this as, "Anything that an unor-

[1] Wayne Grudem, "Personal Reflections on the History of CBMW and the State of the Gender Debate," Journal on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, 14.1 (Spring 2009):.... , Issue 1, Spring 2009.
[2] Tim Keller and Kathy Keller, "Women and Ministry," Redeemer Presbyterian Church, November 1989.
[3] Keller, "Women and Ministry."

dained man is allowed to do, a woman is also allowed to do."[4] While not all complementarians have a view as thin as this, the general tendency is toward a feminist-inflected view of women's roles. (John Piper is a rare exception in saying women should also not serve in roles like military combat or when they hold "personal and directive"[5] authority over men).

What's more, complementarianism could be seen as effectively an acceptance of Second Wave Feminism but for areas where it explicitly came into conflict with Scripture. As we saw above, the developers of complementarianism agreed with many feminist complaints. For example, the Danvers Statement says, without substantiation, that there was an "upsurge of physical and emotional abuse in the family."

Complementarian theology also redefines headship to all but strip it of authority, while amplifying the husband's responsibility for every negative thing in the household in addition to his responsibility to sacrifice everything in order to serve his wife and children. This is the "servant leader," copying a term coined in 1970 by management consultant Robert Greenleaf.[6] In fact, complementarianism defines manhood almost entirely in terms of man's relationship with his wife and children.

As an example of how complementarians tie themselves into pretzels to avoid saying anything to offend feminist sensibilities, John Piper, in his multiple essays criticizing women in military combat roles, never says men are better suited for those positions, and blames women being admitted to them entirely on male cowardice.[7]

My assessment of what was emerging as complementarianism is largely validated by renowned sociologist James Davison Hunter in his 1987 academic book *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*. He notes its newness, saying "That this model is historically unique there is little doubt." He also describes its teaching as "doublespeak" in which hierarchy is affirmed in principle while denied in practice.

Complementarianism is a deeply flawed system, created and promoted largely by Silent Generation and Boomer figures — Piper, Grudem, and the Kellers are all Boomers — to respond to the specific cultural currents of the 1970s and 80s. It is likely to prove untenable in the long term because cultural conditions continue to change, and generational transition will eliminate those for whom complementarianism resonates.

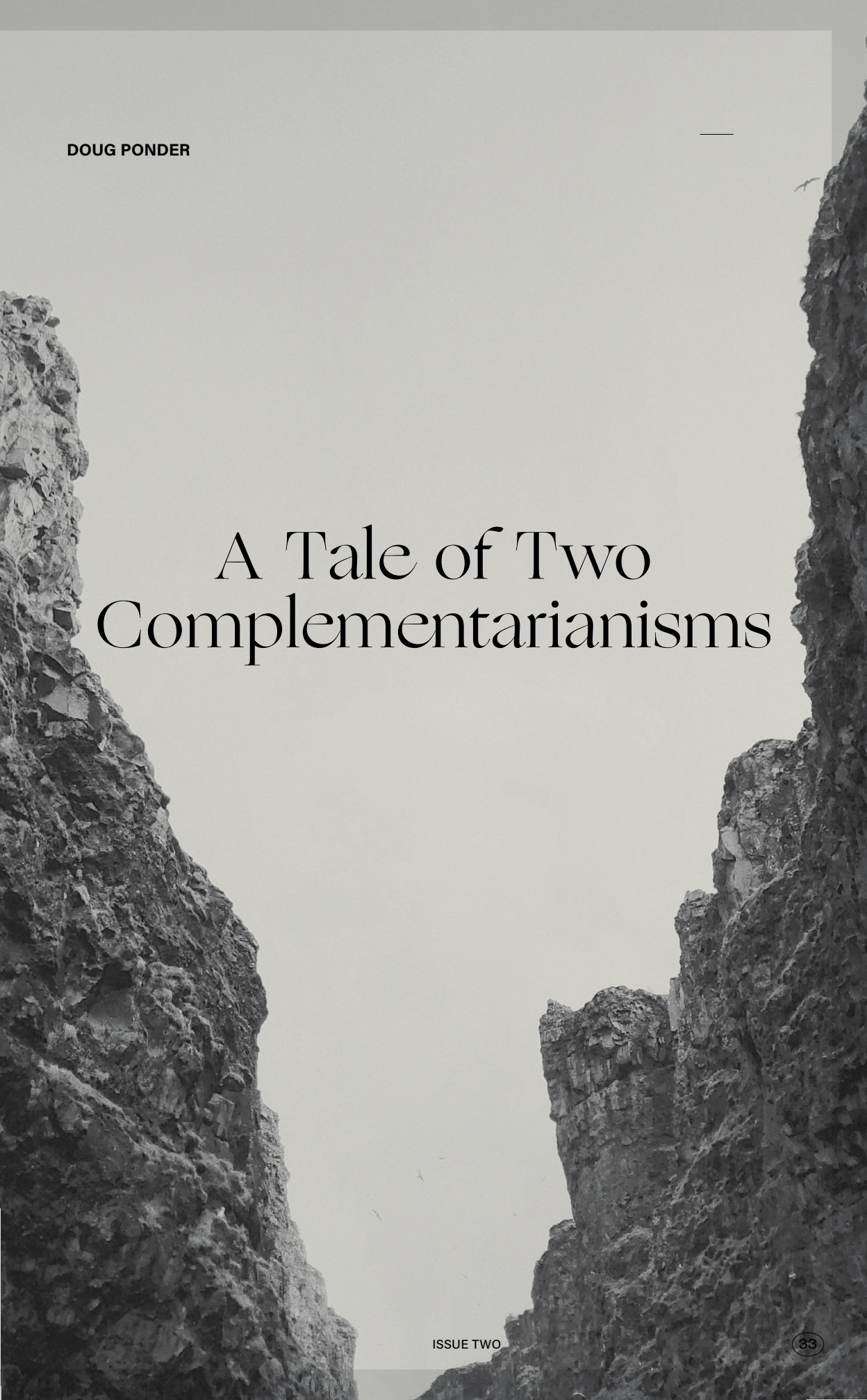
Any viable replacement must be based in anthropology, that is, it must be based in creation order consistent with Scripture, rather than a narrow biblicism. And it must be defined by what it believes to be true rather than as a reactive system defined by what it is against. Most likely such an approach will not be created until the passage of the Boomer generation is complete.

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[4] Kathy Keller, *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles*: *A Case for Gender Roles in Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 21.
[5] Piper, John, "Should Women Be Police Officers?", Desiring God, August 13, 2015.
[6] The term is generally traced to Greenleaf's 1970 essay, "The Servant as Leader."
[7] See his Desiring God essays, "Co-ed Combat and Cultural Cowardice" (November 2, 2007), "More on Women in Combat" (November 4, 2007), and "The Folly of Men Arming Women for Combat" (January 6, 2014).

DOUG PONDER

A Tale of Two Complementarianisms



The future of complementarianism depends, in part, on *which* complementarianism we mean. That term once named a recognizable and broadly consistent position held by Christians who affirmed the Bible's teachings on the sexes. It has since become apparent that complementarians come in two kinds. Like Judah and Israel, these camps share a common origin but have divergent trajectories. The essential points of division concern the scope of male and female differences, the reason the differences exist, and the extent to which these differences should shape all of life.

Recall that at its founding in the late 1980s (when the Danvers Statement was drafted), complementarianism affirmed the long-held conviction that men and women are "equal before God as persons and distinct in their manhood and womanhood (Gen 1:26–27, 2:18)."[1] It is true that Danvers does not spell out every place where biblical authors assign significance to sexual differences, nor every sphere where these differences are expressed. It is, intentionally, a very brief statement that was never meant to say all that could be said about men and women but was only meant to affirm the foundation. After all, its framers expounded voluminously on their views, showing that most of the statement's earliest adherents seemed to understand that the import of sexual difference extends beyond a handful of biblical texts.[2]

To the point, Denny Burk has recently argued that the statement's omissions were an intentional move to avoid "controversial matters that [the drafters] knew might otherwise divide complementarians."[3] Such strategies have long been part of prudential plans for building solid coalitions, but after forty years it increasingly looks as though this gambit has not worked. Instead, the movement seems to be splintering into what has come to be known as "broad" and "narrow" (a.k.a. "thick" and "thin" or "hard" and "soft") complementarianism.[4] And I am far from alone in my doubts as to whether these two camps can continue to share a common label for much longer.

"The future of complementarianism depends, in part, on which complementarianism we mean... It has since become apparent that complementarians come in two kinds."

It is likely that the roots of the current division were present from the beginning, though I think they were largely unseen and temporarily underrealized. To be sure, not all complementarians had an equally developed theology of the sexes. Yet virtually all complementarians

[1] The Danvers Statement, Affirmation 1, The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, November 1988, https://cbmw.org/about/danvers-statement/.
[2] See, for example, John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, 3rd. edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).
[3] Denny Burk, *Mere Complementarianism: Male and Female in the Image of God* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2026), 21.
[4] For an extensive overview of these distinctions, see Andy Naselli, "Does Anyone Need to Recover from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood?" *Eikon* 2.1 (Spring 2020): 109–151.

thirty-plus years ago were still culturally conservative in ways that reinforced — even when imperfectly understood or insufficiently applied — the basic thrust of their theology. As a result, their families, churches, and general interactions typically placed a high significance on male and female differences.

That is no longer the case. The unity in the complementarian movement, to whatever extent it formerly existed, has weakened considerably in the last decade or so. Indeed, more and more of those who continue to embrace the label of "complementarianism" now deny many of its implicit premises as well as its explicit applications. Hence it is now common to hear of self-avowed complementarians arguing that "*anything* that an unordained man is allowed to do, a woman is also allowed to do,"[5] that women can preach in the Sunday gathering,[6] and that women may even serve as pastors.[7]

Those authors all affirm the Danvers Statement while espousing positions with only a hair's breadth between their views and that of egalitarians. But some have gone even further. A recent book by a professor at a prominent Southern Baptist seminary addressed the complementarity of the sexes in such a way that egalitarians heralded the book as a triumph for *their* position. As CBE author Hashim Warren says of that book, "Allison's complementarity… *is* mutuality [i.e., egalitarianism]."[8] Warren goes on to say that egalitarianism is "precisely what Allison's theological framework supports, even as he hesitates to embrace the label."[9]

Here, then, is the future of complementarianism. On one side will be those who see the sexual differences in God's design as prior to and instructive for all the "rules" and "roles" that God assigns to men and women. As a result, these adherents are keen to explore the significance of male-female differences in all arenas of life in view of both the principles set forth in Scripture and the facts of God's other book, creation.[10]



On the other side are those who limit what they say about women and men to the barest handful of biblical texts (e.g., 1 Cor 11:2–16, Eph 5:21–33, and 1 Tim 2:8–15), which many avoid as often as they can. Yet when they do speak about these

[5] Kathy Keller, *Jesus, Justice, & Gender Roles: A Case for Gender Roles in Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 21 (emphasis added).
[6] See, for example, Andrew Wilson, "Women Preachers: A Response to John Piper," *Think* (blog), May 6, 2015. See also John Dickson, *Hearing Her Voice: A Biblical Invitation for Women to Preach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2013).
[7] See Sam Storms, "A Complementarian Case for Women Pastors – Part One," *Enjoying God* (blog), May 28, 2026.
[8] Hashim Warren, "Book Review: Complementarity: Dignity, Difference, and Interdependence," *CBE International* (blog), February 18, 2026.
[9] Ibid.
[10] See John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1.5–6.

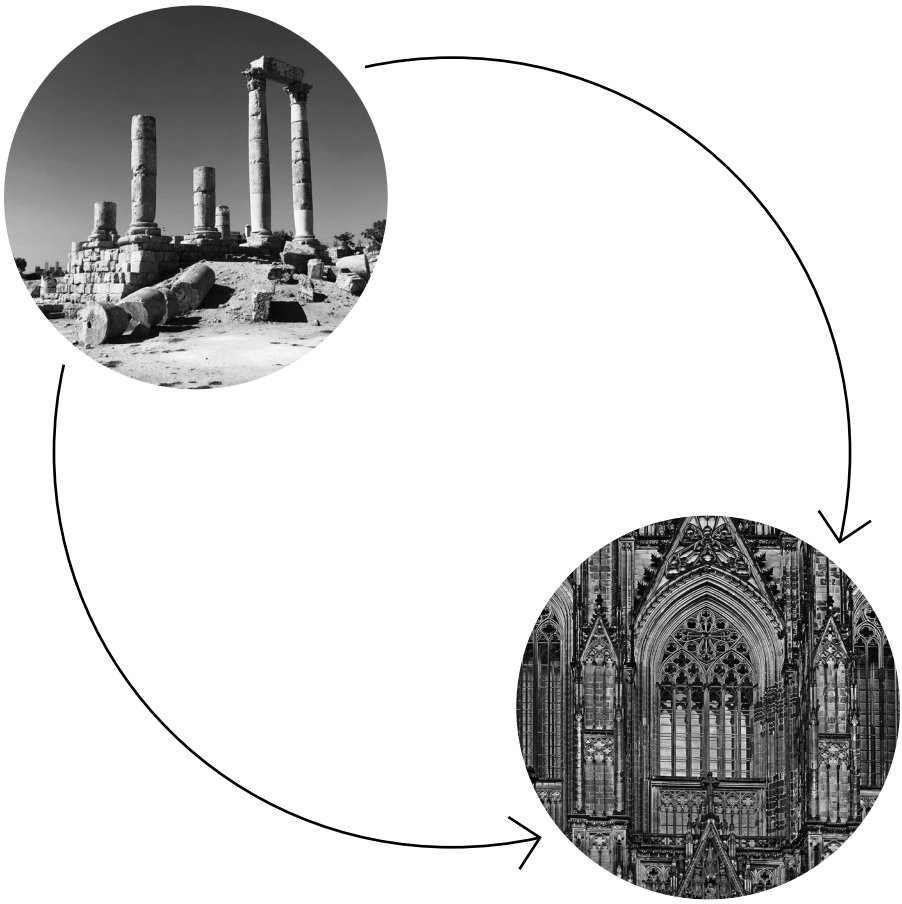
texts, they fail to ground God's directives in God's design. That is to say, they fail to give sufficient account for the *why* (God's created order) behind the *what* (God's commands). In so doing, they make God's commands appear to be utterly arbitrary. And arbitrary orders — as every parent knows — won't hold the obedience of any child for long.

Besides all this, we now live in a culture where any differences between men and women are seen as obstacles to True Equality™ that must therefore be eradicated or destroyed. This growing gap between the world's view of men and women and the Bible's teaching on the same will continue to place tremendous pressure on Christians to conform or be "cancelled." And those complementarians who routinely diminish the significance of sexual differences will be the first to cave. Many already have.

I'm neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I suspect it won't be long before many of complementarianism's strongest adherents begin to jettison that term. Why should they want to share a label with those who are ashamed of the church's centuries-long consensus concerning God's design of the sexes? As for the other complementarian camp, I urge them to recognize that adopting a maximally thin framework will not alleviate the mounting pressure to conform to the world. For you cannot appease those who are departing from God's design by reducing it to the barest of threads; all you can do is water down "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

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DENNY BURK



Returning to the Vision of Danvers

The grimmest prediction about the future of complementarianism came about seven years ago from Aaron Renn, who wrote that "Complementarianism Is a Baby Boomer Theology That Will Die with the Baby Boomers." He explained,

> The future of complementarianism looks grim, because it was developed as a response to a specific set of cultural circumstances in the late 1980s that no longer exist, and because it's a theology of the Baby Boomers, especially the early half of that generation, that seems likely to fade away along with them.[1]

I disagreed with this assessment at the time and said so in writing and in a conversation with Renn on his podcast.[2] This prediction reduces complementarianism to a social trend within evangelicalism and overlooks the fact that complementarianism is fundamentally a theological proposition. As such, it either faithfully reflects what the Bible teaches or it doesn't. If it does, then it can no more go extinct than the Bible and the people of God can go extinct (Isa 40:8; Matt 16:18). In that sense, you can rest assured that complementarianism as a biblical doctrine isn't going anywhere.

But that doesn't mean that there aren't significant challenges facing the people of God as they stand upon what the Bible teaches concerning manhood and womanhood. Those challenges come both from without and from within.

Post-modern feminism, queer theory, and the secular spirit of the age all conspire from without to undermine the teaching and exert pressure upon God's people to abandon the Bible's vision for marriage and the sexes. From within, there are varying responses to this pressure — some wishing to capitulate as much as possible to the spirit of the age while softening the harder edges of biblical doctrine and others doubling down on biblical doctrine while advancing a legally binding patriarchy within a Christian Nationalist conquest of the political order.

Both of these alternatives are extremely problematic and in some ways undermine what the Bible and nature reveal about God's will for the sexes.

IS THE FUTURE SOFT-COMPLEMENTARIAN?

So-called "soft complementarianism" in its worst forms is little more than soft egalitarianism.[3] They want to apply complementarian doctrine *narrowly* to two spheres — the church and the home. A husband should be a faithful head of his wife, and the office of pastor is limited to men who meet the Bible's qualifications for church leadership. Outside of those two narrow prohibitions, men's and women's roles are basically interchangeable. In the home, that means that husbands may on rare occasions have to cast a tie-breaking vote when there is disagreement with his wife, but other than that the marriage is functionally egalitarian. A husband's "servant leadership" ends up being long on serving and short on authority and leadership.

[1] Aaron Renn, "Complementarianism Is a Baby Boomer Theology That Will Die with the Baby Boomers," The Masculinist (New York, NY, February 14, 2019), http://www.aaronrenn.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/The-Masculinist-30-Complementarianism-Is-a-Baby-Boomer-Theology.pdf. See also Jake Meador, "Will Complementarianism Die with the Baby Boomers?," Mere Orthodoxy, March 5, 2019, https://mereorthodoxy.com/complementarianism/. Aaron Renn and I had a productive discussion about all this two years later on his podcast. See *Complementarianism and Its Discontents (with Denny Burk)*, The Aaron Renn Show, May 5, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvG2l_4wOuM.

[2] *Complementarianism and Its Discontents (with Denny Burk)*, The Aaron Renn Show, May 5, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvG2l_4wOu

[3] What follows is adapted from my book *Mere Complementarianism: Male and Female in the Image of God* (Christian Focus, 2026), 4-6.

In the church, qualified men are called to hold the office of leadership, but otherwise there is very little if any gender-based guidance for a church's ministry. For example, in her little book *Jesus, Justice, & Gender Roles*, Kathy Keller argues that women ought to be allowed to serve in any role in the church that an unordained man is allowed to serve in. Care must be taken not to transgress the biblical prohibition on women serving as elders. Otherwise, women may serve in any avenue of ministry that an unordained man can.[4]

But this vision of things is a far cry from the norms described in the Danvers Statement — which is the defining doctrinal articulation of complementarianism. Danvers reflects the biblical teaching that some governing and teaching roles are exclusively for qualified men. It also affirms that husbands are heads of their homes and that wives should submit to that leadership. Soft complementarianism chaffs against these norms and tries to bend the teaching to accommodate egalitarian sensibilities. That is not the original Danvers vision, and it's not going to be the future of complementarianism. It's more likely to be a weigh-station to egalitarianism than anything else.

IS THE FUTURE PATRIARCHY?

On the other end of the spectrum, some have argued that a new Christian patriarchy is the only way to stand against the headwinds of egalitarianism and feminism. They argue that soft complementarianism *is* complementarianism, is therefore doctrinally compromised, and cannot provide a bulwark against an encroaching feminism. A much harder line must be drawn. Men must rule over women not only in the church and the home but also in the wider society. Patriarchy is the state of nature. It is the way things are in spite of ideologies. The only question is what kind of patriarchy we will have — one defined by biblical standards or one defined by godless ones.

To the degree that biblical patriarchy overlaps with biblical teaching (and there is much that does), that is all to the good. However, the biblical patriarchy movement is not without its problems, some of them very serious.

For starters, the use of the term "patriarchy" is misleading.[5] A word's meaning is established by usage, and the term patriarchy is the coinage of second wave feminists (see Kate Millet) who defined patriarchy as a virtual synonym for misogyny and abuse. Consequently, the term doesn't communicate "benevolent father-rule" to most people but something perniciously tied to the misuse and abuse of women. As a prudential matter, this is an unwise way to self-identify. Nevertheless, many advocates of biblical patriarchy view the misunderstanding as a feature and not a bug. After all, it's a chance to "own the libs" by provoking their ire.

And that points to another downside of the biblical patriarchy movement. It functions as more of a vibe than an explicit doctrinal proposition. The term *patriarchy* has no creedal definition. Phrases like *biblical patriarchy* or *Christian patriarchy* lack confessional standing and refer loosely to a movement that emphasizes male authority in every sphere of life. Because of this lack of definition, a number of fringe teachings and practices have flown under the banner of "biblical patriarchy." Here I'm thinking about wife-spanking (corporal punishment for disobedient wives), false teachings about "umbrellas of

[4] Kathy Keller, *Jesus, Justice, & Gender Roles: A Case for Gender Roles in Ministry*, Fresh Perspectives on Women in Ministry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 29, 34.
[5] What follows is an adaptation of appendix 4 in my book *Mere Complementarianism*.

authority," the repeal of the 19th amendment (which granted women the right to vote), and more. Moreover, biblical patriarchy tends to be associated with a Christian Nationalist vision of the political order, and in some cases with explicitly fascist interpretations of the faith.[6]

I am not accusing everyone who adopts the label "biblical patriarchy" of such aberrant practices and beliefs. I know that there are many who believe almost identically to what I believe. Nevertheless, it is a problem for proponents of biblical patriarchy that there is no doctrinal standard or confession by which to adjudicate errors in their movement. They have no formal way of saying "biblical patriarchy is *this* and not *that*."

Advocates of biblical patriarchy promote a "consistent biblical view of men and women where men rule in the home, church, and society."[7] While I would agree that male and female difference has implications wherever men and women can be found, that does not mean that all men have God-given authority to rule all women. And this is one key area in which advocates of biblical patriarchy need some confessional clarity (which they currently lack). Scripture teaches that a husband is the head of his own wife, not the head of anyone else's wife (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:23). Likewise, the Bible teaches that a wife should submit to her own husband, not to all men (Eph. 5:23-24). While creation design has implications for all of life, it does not imply a necessary relation of authority and submission in every sphere of life.

While it may go against the grain of nature for women to "rule" in certain roles, that does not mean that all men have authority over all women in every sphere of



[6] "New Christendom Press Under Fire After Conference Vendor Promoted, Hawked Nazi Books and 'Pro-White' Groups," Protestia (June 15, 2026), https://protestia.com/2026/06/15/new-christendom-press-under-fire-after-conference-vendor-promoted-hawked-nazi-books-and-pro-white-groups/.

[7] Zachary M. Garris, *Masculine Christianity* (Reformation Zion, 2021), ix. Garris writes, "The same nature that prohibits a woman from exercising familial authority prohibits her from exercising civil authority," (Garris, *Masculine Christianity*, 244).



life. It is these kinds of distinctions and definitions that are sometimes missing from the biblical patriarchy movement. The result is that much of the movement relies heavily on masculine vibes rather than on confessional clarity about how creation order cashes-out in the various spheres of life. Confessional clarity would offer an articulation of principles that can be true no matter the vicissitudes of life in this fallen world.

THE WAY FORWARD IS COMPLEMENTARIAN

I still believe that the way forward for complementarianism is the vision that was laid out in Danvers. We do not need to split the difference between soft complementarianism and patriarchy and call that truth. Rather, we need to attend to nature and to Scripture — all of God's revelation — and reconcile our doctrine and our lives to that revelation. There are God-ordained differences between male and female that are rooted in God's design of creation. Those differences relate not only to reproductive roles but also to social roles like headship and helpership. Those social differences have implications not only for the church and the home but for wherever men and women may be found. For men and women don't cease to be men and women when they go outside home and church. That is the original vision of Danvers, and it should be the ongoing vision of complementarianism.

Denny Burk is the President of CBMW.

KYLE A. DILLON



Gender in Deep Heaven

In the second novel of C.S. Lewis's *Ransom Trilogy*, the main character Dr. Elwin Ransom travels to planet Venus, known as *Perelandra* in the Old Solar language.[1] His mission is to prevent the unfallen natives from disobeying the command of the divine ruler Maleldil and from plunging the planet into sin and ruin. The novel thus serves as an imaginative exploration of the question, what might the world have been like if the Fall had been averted? Paradise — not lost, nor regained — but *kept*?

After succeeding in his task — though at great injury to himself — Ransom journeys on foot into a mountain pass, where he encounters the two Oyarsas (presiding angels) of Malacandra (Mars) and Perelandra. To prepare for the arrival of the newly glorified King Tor and Queen Tinidril (the Perelandrian equivalent of Adam and Eve), the Oyarsas assume visible form as two tall, radiant human figures. Lewis describes them in these words:

> The two white creatures were sexless. But he of Malacandra was masculine (not male); she of Perelandra was feminine (not female). Malacandra seemed to him to have the look of one standing armed, at the ramparts of his own remote archaic world, in ceaseless vigilance, his eyes ever roaming the earth-ward horizon whence his danger came long ago. . . . But the eyes of Perelandra opened, as it were, inward, as if they were the curtained gateway to a world of waves and murmurings and wandering airs, of life that rocked in winds and splashed on mossy stones and descended as the dew and arose sunward in thin-spun delicacy of mist.[2]

Ransom thus discovered that gender is a deeper reality than sex. Sex is "merely the adaptation to organic life of a fundamental polarity which divides all created beings."[3] Maleness and femaleness are the concrete symbols; masculinity and femininity are the realities signified. In Lewis's fictional telling, even the landscapes of Mars and Venus reflect this cosmic gender binary: the former is cold, austere, and angular, while the latter is warm, fertile, and undulating. In brief, sex is *biological*, but gender is *metaphysical*.

Or so Lewis would have us accept. But is this idea *biblical*? Are masculinity and femininity truly rooted in Scripture, or are they merely social constructs? Many contemporary Christians take a minimalist approach on the question.

[1] C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra*, in *The Space Trilogy* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2011).
[2] Lewis, *Perelandra*, 172.
[3] Lewis, *Perelandra*, 171.

For example, Rachel Green Miller, a critic of complementarian theology, writes, "If God made you a woman, you are feminine. . . . If God made you a man, you are masculine."[4] On this view, gender is virtually reducible to biological sex. Anything beyond this, it is claimed, is stereotyping.

GENDER IN THE CREATION ORDER

There are, however, good biblical reasons for taking a broader view of gender. Following the logic of Jesus and the Apostle Paul (Matt 19:3–9; 1 Cor 11:7–16; 1 Tim 2:12–15), we can look to the creation order itself in Genesis 1–3. There we read ssthat Adam was formed first, then Eve. Adam was formed from and for the earth, Eve from and for Adam. Adam was a guardian and laborer, Eve a helper and companion. Mankind is named after Adam, but Eve is named by Adam. Adam was called out for his sin first, even though Eve was first to disobey. Adam was cursed in his work, Eve in her family relationships. These features of the story are more than incidental.

If we accept Adam and Eve to be paradigms for masculinity and femininity, then certain conclusions follow. Given our creational design, we would expect men to be initiators, more aggressive, and more task-oriented. We would expect women to be responders, more nurturing, and more relationship-oriented. We would also expect men and women to be prone to different vices; this explains why Paul warns men against anger and quarreling (1 Tim 2:8) and women against immodesty, gossip, and meddling (1 Tim 2:9; 5:13).

It is, of course, important to avoid certain misunderstandings: gender norms are not grounded merely in general behavioral patterns or statistical bell curves. After all, there will always be certain outliers of both genders — *some* men will be more nurturing, and *some* women will be more aggressive. Rather, the point is that Adam and Eve each express a fundamentally different *telos* or orientation to life, which in turn gives rise to both the gender norms and the general behavioral patterns.

Likewise, we would be mistaken to treat these norms as an absolute and inflexible standard in all circumstances. While men will ordinarily gravitate toward masculine behaviors and women toward feminine behaviors, there are

[4] Rachel Green Miller, *Beyond Authority and Submission: Women and Men in Marriage, Church, and Society* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2019), 148–149.

appropriate exceptions. Consider the Apostle Paul, who told the Thessalonians that he had been "gentle" and "affectionate" toward them like a mother (1 Thess 2:7–8), but he also "exhorted" and "encouraged" them like a father (1 Thess 2:11–12). Paul recognizes that mothers are generally more affectionate and fathers are more directive. Now sometimes a man may act maternally or a woman paternally, but the real differences between them nevertheless remain.

So far, I'm not saying anything that many others haven't already said before. But I want to press the argument further and show how masculinity has an even more basic foundation *in God himself*. I want to make the case that Lewis was right after all: gender is not merely biological, but metaphysical and cosmological. It's grounded in God's very relationship to creation. As Ransom later expressed it, "What is above and beyond all things is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to it."[5]

DIVINE MASCULINITY IN SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

Now this is an area where contemporary evangelicals differ among themselves. Some have argued that a wife's submission to her husband is grounded in the Son's eternal submission to the Father. Critics, however, have noted that this sort of argument is unprecedented in earlier church history and undermines the classical doctrine of divine simplicity, whereby God possesses one undivided will, without any distinctions of authority in the Trinitarian relations. On this point, I side with the critics.[6]

And yet the Trinitarian relations do reveal *something* relevant to gender. After all, God has revealed himself to us with the names "Father" and "Son," not "Mother" and "Daughter." And even though the word for "spirit" is grammatically feminine in Hebrew (*ruaḥ*) and neuter in Greek (*pneuma*), the Holy Spirit is sometimes described in masculine terms in both testaments (e.g., Isa 40:13; John 16:13). Is this terminology simply an accommodation to the patriarchal culture in which the Bible was written, or does it communicate something more meaningful about God's being?

[5] Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, in *The Space Trilogy* 313. See also Peter Kreeft, "Sexual Symbolism," https://peterkreeft.com/ topics-more/sexual-symbolism.htm (accessed November 4, 2025): "Male and female are only the biological version of cosmic masculine and feminine."

[6] For a more thorough critique of the eternal subordination of the Son, see Steven J. Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2022), 76–87, 122–126. To anticipate an objection, I think 1 Corinthians 11:3 is about Christ's submission to God according to his humanity, not according to his divinity.

While firmly denying that God is "male" in any corporeal sense, Christians have historically insisted on using masculine language for God. By contrast, plenty of ancient pagan religions spoke of God in feminine terms — the Canaanites had Asherah, the Egyptians had Isis, and the Babylonians had Tiamat. The later Gnostics also spoke of a feminine divinity, variously referred to as Achamoth, Sophia, or even the Holy Spirit. This belies the claim that biblical language had to accommodate patriarchal culture; goddess worship was widespread at that time. And yet, despite the pressures toward pagan syncretism, Bible-believing Christians remained united in their confession of God as Father, not Mother.

This historic consensus has come under attack with the rise of feminist theology since the 1960s. The critics are not monolithic, and some have moved further away from Christian orthodoxy than others. Mary Daly, one of the first feminist theologians, eventually renounced Christianity.[7] Others like Sally McFague and Elizabeth Johnson continued to identify as Christian, but in a fundamentally resymbolized form.[8] Additionally, numerous mainline denominations and organizations have sought to revise their confessions and liturgies in line with more gender-inclusive language for God. Rather than referring to *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Spirit*, they speak of *Creator*, *Redeemer*, and *Sanctifier*. More radical theologians like Rosemary Ruether and Carol Christ have even adopted explicitly feminine titles for God, like "Womb of Being" and "Primal Matrix."[9]

CENTRIST AND EGALITARIAN RESPONSES TO FEMINIST REVISIONISM

It may come as a surprise that the most thorough responses to feminist revisions of Scripture's God-language have come not from conservative evangelical complementarians or patriarchalists, but from centrist and egalitarian mainline theologians such as Elizabeth Achtemeier (PCUSA), Donald Bloesch (UCC), and Alvin Kimel (formerly Episcopal).[10] One of the best responses is by John W. Cooper (CRCNA), retired professor of philosophical theology at

[7] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), 19.
[8] Sally McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1982); Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (Redwood City, CA: PublishDrive, 2017).
[9] Rosemary Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993); Carol Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998).
[10] Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods,'" in Alvin Kimel, ed., *Speaking the Christian God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992); Donald Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001); Alvin Kimel, ed., *This Is My Name Forever* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).

Calvin Theological Seminary.[11] Cooper provides an exhaustive treatment of both feminine and masculine references to God in Scripture, concluding that the differences between them are both quantitative and qualitative. On the one hand, there are about two dozen feminine references to God in Scripture, *all* of which are figurative in form, such as similes and metaphors (Isa 66:13; Matt 23:37). On the other hand, there are thousands of masculine references to God in the form of titles and appellatives, as well as grammatically masculine parts of speech such as verb forms, pronouns, and adjectives. So although the Bible occasionally uses feminine *imagery* for God, the *names* of God are exclusively masculine.

"although the Bible occasionally uses feminine imagery for God, the names of God are exclusively masculine."

And yet Cooper stops short of concluding that God *is* masculine. Rather, his claim is merely that "Scripture speaks of God *as though* he is masculine or as *anthropomorphically* masculine."[12] While acknowledging that the biblical text doesn't strictly deny God's masculinity, Cooper argues on philosophical grounds that, as a perfect being, God cannot have partial, contingent, or correlative attributes. And since masculinity and femininity are partial, contingent, and correlative attributes, God must transcend gender.[13]

Although there is some truth in this claim, I think call-

[11] John W. Cooper, *Our Father in Heaven: Christian Faith and Inclusive Language for God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998). The CRCNA is a generally more centrist Reformed denomination—more conservative than the mainline RCA, but more progressive than the URCNA. It has permitted the ordination of women to all church offices since 1996. See https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/women-ecclesiastical-office (accessed November 7, 2025).
[12] Cooper, *Our Father in Heaven*, 92.
[13] Cooper, *Our Father in Heaven*, 186–187.

ing God's masculinity merely anthropomorphic is too weak. Anthropomorphism is a type of metaphor — an improper or secondary signification — such as when we attribute to God repentance, jealousy, or grief.[14] Such a characterization would make the Bible's masculine language for God categorically equivalent to its feminine language, undermining Cooper's own argument that the differences between them are not only quantitative but also qualitative. I believe it's truer to Scripture to speak of God's masculinity as a form of proper or primary signification rather than as a mere literary trope.[15]

Relatedly, Cooper is unable to give a compelling reason *why*, if God is beyond gender, he has nevertheless chosen to reveal himself in predominantly masculine rather than feminine language. To be sure, Cooper denies that the biblical pattern is arbitrary, and he suggests possible nongendered reasons why the Bible privileges masculine language for God.[16] And yet he also suggests the hypothetical possibility that God could have revealed himself in predominantly feminine language: "Perhaps God could have chosen to reveal himself as *Mother* or *Father-Mother* without misrepresentation and still have accomplished his redemptive purposes in the world. But he didn't."[17] Following this same logic, one could also say that Christ could hypothetically have chosen to become incarnate as a woman.

Cooper's stance on divine genderlessness reveals an underlying lack of clarity on what gender actually is. On the one hand, he recognizes that it might extend beyond biological sex.[18] On the other hand, he is reluctant to define gender by stereotypical patterns.[19] But where does that then leave us? How can he say that God's masculinity is merely anthropomorphic without first specifying what ontological masculinity even means? Without a clearly defined ontology of gender, we are also left with no co-

[14] On metaphors as improper significations, see Duby, *Jesus and the God of Classical Theism*, 337–363.

[15] Robert Jenson, "The Father, He . . ." in Kimel, *Speaking the Christian God*, 104–105, argues that this issue was at the heart of the early Trinitarian controversies: "For the entire joint contention of the variously 'Arian' or mediating parties in the great struggle of the fourth century can be summarized thus: 'Jesus is the Son of the Father' is a trope. And the entire contention of the Nicene party can be summarized thus: 'Jesus is the Son of the Father' is not a trope."

[16] Cooper's proposed reasons are the Creator-creature relation (205), the Trinity (213), and the deity of Christ (217). I believe this first reason has merit and return to it below. However, the second and third reasons at best support only the superiority of gendered language for God over gender-egalitarian or gender-neutral language. They do not support the superiority of noninclusive masculine language over noninclusive feminine language, and are therefore vulnerable to the same critiques as those against Peeler below.

[17] Cooper, *Our Father in Heaven*, 199.

[18] Cooper, *Our Father in Heaven*, 185.

[19] Cooper, *Our Father in Heaven*, 261.

herent justification for normative gender differences. It should therefore come as no surprise that Cooper holds an egalitarian view of women's ordination.[20]

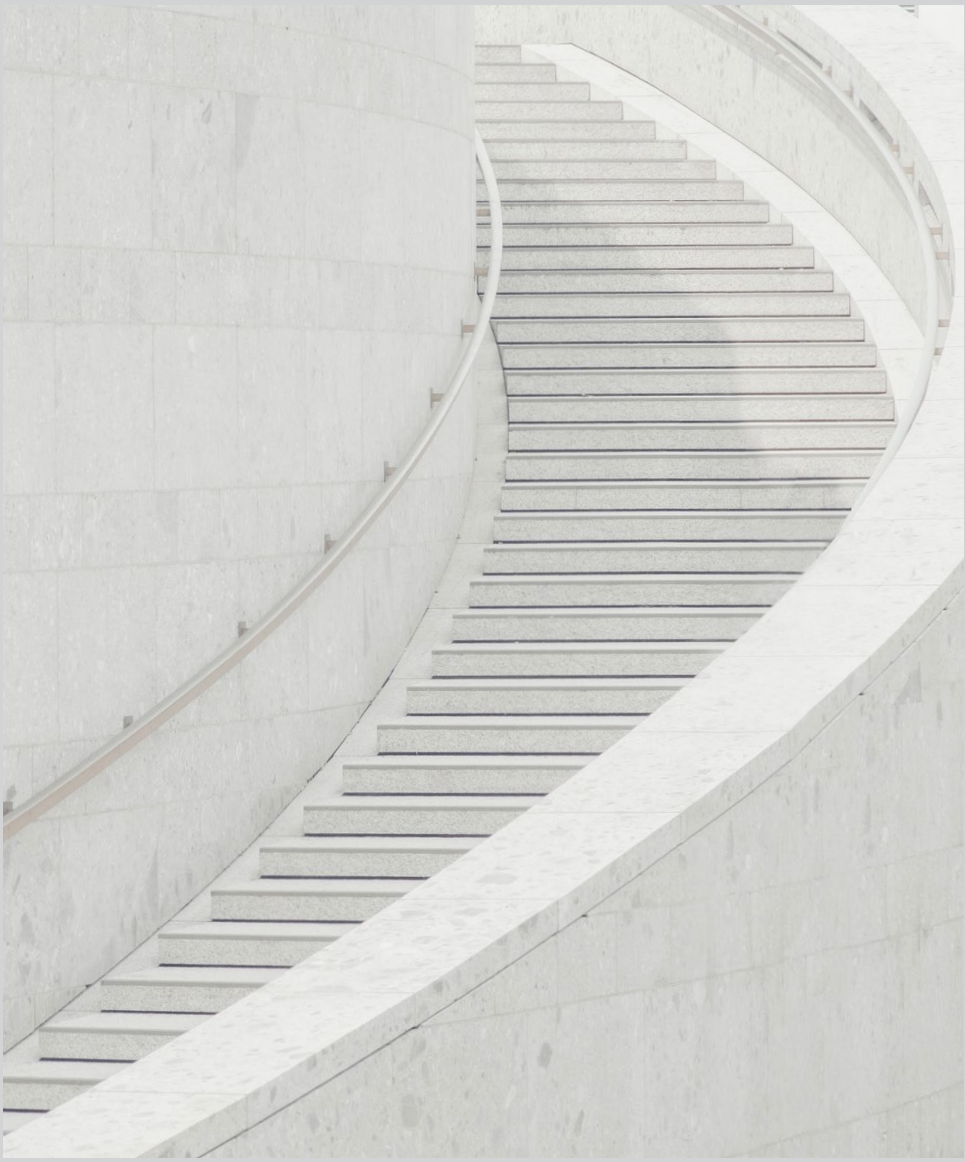
A more recent critic of divine masculinity is Amy Peeler, an Episcopal professor at Wheaton College. She attempts to harmonize Scripture's gendered language with God's genderlessness through a creative appeal to the doctrine of the Incarnation:

> A patriarchal society and the few glimmers of God's fatherhood in the Scriptures of Israel do not fully explain the incarnate Son's linguistic expression of his eternal, personal, and begotten relationship with God. If the eternal relationship was the motivation, Jesus should call God "Father," or "Mother," or "Parent" even. It must be the incarnation that narrows the fitting choice for divine address. Jesus does not call God "Mother" because he already has one.[21]

According to Peeler, when God is considered *in se* (in himself, that is, apart from his redemptive acts), feminine language is just as valid as masculine language. Only the Incarnation constitutes God's designation as Christ's Father, being a fitting complement to Mary's role as Christ's mother. Peeler then combines this move with a peculiar view of the uniqueness of Christ's mediatorial role: since Christ is without a biological father, he is the only man derived from female-only flesh, and for this reason he is uniquely able to represent both men and women as their Redeemer.[22] Thus Christ's maleness would be no hindrance to affirming the genderlessness of God — or the ordination of women.

There are, however, three problems with Peeler's argument, however. First, it does not account for the overwhelmingly masculine language used for God in the Old Testament, which is not grounded in the Incarnation. Second, the New Testament describes God as the Father of Christ even in his preincarnate state (John 8:54–58; 17:5, 24; 1 John 1:1–2). In order for Peeler's argument to work, she must posit that God's paternal designation is retroactively applied before the Incarnation. But this is simply special pleading. Nowhere does Scripture teach that the designation of God's Fatherhood depends upon Mary's motherhood. Rather, as evangelical Trinitarian scholar Fred Sanders argues:

[20] Cooper, *Our Father in Heaven*, 248 n10.
[21] Amy Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), 115.
[22] Ibid, 137–142.



The first person of the Trinity is God the Father. God is called the Father, in the first place, for Trinitarian reasons. He is the Father because he is the Father of the Son, from eternity, at home in the happy land of the Trinity. He did not become the Father at Christmas, or at any point in human history, or in any pretemporal history. He did not undergo any transformation from being not-the-Father to being the Father.[23]

[23] Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 92. Peeler's theology echoes that of twentieth-century theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, who regarded the Trinitarian relations in the economy of redemption as definitive (rather than merely reflective) of the immanent Trinity; see Stephen Holmes,

The third problem is that Peeler's view gives us no coherent reason why redemptive history could not have unfolded with all of the gender roles reversed. Consider the following hypothetical scenario: God reveals "herself" as heavenly Mother and Daughter rather than as Father and Son. The Mother then appoints a man to be the human father of the female incarnate Christ — perhaps in some miraculous way similar to God forming Eve from Adam's rib.[24] In this way, Christ could be the only woman derived from male-only flesh, and would therefore be able to represent both women and men as their Redemptrix. Now there are two possibilities here: either egalitarian logic is sound and this scenario is in principle just as valid as the manner of redemption that God actually chose, or else this scenario is fundamentally opposed to the logic of orthodox Christianity. I am convinced of the latter.[25]

Ultimately, those who wish to uphold the authority of Scripture's masculine God-language while denying God's masculinity are in the same predicament as "narrow" complementarians, who try to restrict Scripture's commands on gender roles to marital headship and church eldership, but who cannot give an explanation for why these commands exist in the first place. That is, they leave us rules without reasons.[26] I don't think this accurately reflects the teaching of Scripture, which presents masculine language for God not as arbitrary but as a more suitable expression of his character. Roman Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft correctly observes:

> The masculinity of God is not part of the shell, but part of the nut. It is not like Hebrew grammar, a translatable and replaceable medium. Something as deliberate and distinctive and as all-pervasive in Scripture as God's he-ness is no mere accident. . . .[27]

Therefore, I believe we must conclude that God is mascu-

The Quest for the Trinity (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 18; Steven Duby, *God in Himself* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2019), 270–279. To be clear, Peeler's claim is not that the Incarnation constitutes a change in the Trinitarian relations per se, but rather only in their signification. However, this is still unbiblical.

[24] Peeler, 141, believes that Jesus must have had a human mother because "to be a human is to be born, born of a woman." But why should being born of a woman count as more necessary to humanity than being fertilized from a male sperm? Were not Adam and Eve both human without being born of a woman?

[25] On the significance of such hypothetical reversals of Scripture's gendered language for God, see C.S. Lewis, "Priestesses in the Church?" in *God in the Dock* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2014), 237: "Now it is surely the case that if all these supposals were ever carried into effect we should be embarked on a different religion."

[26] Of course, this does not mean we can know the rationale behind all of God's acts, such as his decree to elect some for salvation and to pass over others. His judgments are unsearchable and his ways are inscrutable (Rom. 11:33). And yet it is possible to distinguish between those divine acts that arise solely from God's will and those that correspond rationally to the created order (see more below).

[27] Kreeft, "Sexual Symbolism."

line in some sense that is more than just anthropomorphic. But in exactly what sense?

MAPPING DIVINE ATTRIBUTES AND GENDER

Here I want to build on the recent work of Kyle Claunch on divine fatherhood.[28] Claunch highlights the traditional distinction between God's *absolute* attributes and *relative* attributes. Absolute attributes are those which God would have possessed even if he had chosen not to create the world — such as immutability and immensity. Cooper's claim that a perfect being would be incapable of possessing contingent or correlative attributes is valid, but this only applies to God's absolute attributes.

On the other hand, relative attributes are those which God is said to possess by virtue of his free decision to create the world. These include attributes such as justice and mercy (since these presuppose sin), as well as titles such as Creator, Sustainer, and Judge.[29] Now given divine immutability and simplicity, we must deny that God's relative attributes entail any change or composition in his being. In that sense, the relative attributes are not "real" in God, although they are "real" to us.[30] God does not actually "become" merciful; rather, this is a way of describing God according to his outward acts toward creatures. And yet we would never claim that God is only "anthropomorphically" merciful. For us, it is the truest kind of mercy conceivable, of which human mercy is only a pale shadow.[31]

Claunch has made a persuasive case that *fatherhood* should also be understood as one of God's relative attributes, since it applies primarily and eminently to God, and only secondarily and derivatively to human fatherhood.[32] Extend-

[28] Kyle Claunch, "Theological Language and the Fatherhood of God: An Exegetical and Dogmatic Account," *Eikon* 5.2 (Fall 2023), 46–77.

[29] James Dolezal, *All That Is in God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 95–96.

[30] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 28, a. 1, ad 3: "There is no real relation in God to the creature; whereas in creatures there is a real relation to God." Petrus Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, trans. Todd Rester, ed. Joel Beeke (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 1.2.6.XXIII (2:145–146): "Nor does the relation with what is produced, which from the production belongs to the producer, make that producer a composite. For that relation is not a being of any sort, nor does it imply composition in God (for things are related to something, not in something)."

[31] Claunch, "Theological Language and the Fatherhood of God," 60: "All scriptural language about God is analogical, but not all analogical language is predicated of God in the same way. Sometimes analogical predicates have their original in God and their analog in creation. This mode of predication is what we are calling proper predication. Other times analogical predicates have their original in creation and their analog in God. This includes many forms of metaphorical speech. This is what we are calling figurative predication."

[32] Claunch, "Theological Language and the Fatherhood of God," 71. Claunch also distinguishes between "essential" fatherhood and "personal" fatherhood, the former constituting a relative attribute of the entire Godhead, and the latter

ing this same principle more broadly, I want to argue that *masculinity* is a relative attribute of God — a proper way of describing him according to a certain general "habitude" or disposition toward creation.[33]

To defend this claim, it's necessary to provide a more precise definition of masculinity. Following Lewis, I take gender to be a more fundamental reality than sex. So I view masculinity not simply as a set of social roles or duties arising from biological maleness (in which case God clearly could not be masculine in any literal sense), but as *a disposition consisting primarily in a set of certain qualities oriented to the exercise of divine dominion*.[34] This definition can be contrasted with femininity as a disposition consisting primarily in a set of certain qualities *complementary* to masculinity, which are oriented to the *support* of the exercise of divine dominion.

Now this requires clarification: the contrast between masculinity and femininity is not an absolute opposition but a relative one. A man possesses masculine qualities in a *primary* sense but may also possess feminine qualities in a *secondary* sense. Conversely, a woman possesses feminine qualities in a primary sense but may also possess masculine qualities in a secondary sense. I believe that this primary-secondary distinction is necessary for three reasons. First, it upholds the biblical testimony that God possesses the perfections of both masculinity and femininity while remaining properly and primarily masculine. Second, it accounts for instances in Scripture where men express typically feminine traits (e.g., Paul's maternal affection in 1 Thess 2:7–8) or where women express typically masculine traits (e.g., Ruth taking romantic initiative with Boaz). And third, it allows us to balance the situational flexibility of gendered *behaviors* with the normative fixity of gender *roles*.[35]

Roman Catholic philosopher J. Budziszewski captures this dynamic well in describing masculinity as the potential for fatherhood and femininity as the potential for motherhood:

specifying the first person of the Trinity.

[33] On the language of "habitude" for God's relative attributes, see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George M. Giger, ed. James T. Dennison (P&R, 1992), III.IX.XXII (1:201), IV.I.XIII (1:313).

[34] Using Aristotle's fourfold causality (*Physics* II.3), we can say that the formal cause of masculinity is the disposition (or habitude), the material cause is the set of qualities comprising the disposition, the efficient cause is the agent who expresses this disposition, and the final cause is dominion.

[35] This also answers Peeler's objection that those who make gender differences "more poetry than science" (107) are inconsistent in allowing exceptions to gendered behavior patterns but not to formal gender roles. The roles, however, are defined by these primary gender qualities, and without this primary-secondary distinction, nothing would prevent all gender differences from collapsing into relativism.

> When all goes well, fathers and mothers also exemplify and specialize in different aspects of wisdom. A wise father teaches his wife and family that in order to love you must be strong; a wise mother teaches her husband and family that in order to be strong you must love. She knows that even boldness needs humility; he knows that even humility needs to be bold. He is an animate symbol to his children of that justice which is tempered by mercy, she a living emblem of that mercy which is tempered by justice.[36]

There is also a certain primacy to masculinity over femininity, not only chronologically (1 Tim 2:13) but also teleologically (1 Cor 11:7–9). Donald Bloesch perceptively writes, "Femininity is grounded in masculinity and not vice versa. . . . But as the masculine is the foundation of the feminine, so the feminine is the flower and fruit of the masculine, the glory of the masculine."[37] This principle explains why the Bible's gendered language for God is not reversible, and also why covenant representatives in Scripture are exclusively men. Because masculinity is primary, it can represent femininity, but femininity cannot represent masculinity. Thus humanity can be designated collectively as "man" but not as "woman" (Gen 1:26–27).

Having established these foundational elements of our definitions of masculinity and femininity, we can now briefly identify a list of specific contrasting qualities that distinguish them. I treat this list as suggestive rather than exhaustive, and I again emphasize that the opposition of these qualities is relative rather than absolute:

1. **Externality vs. internality.** This is tied to one of the central distinctions highlighted by defenders of God's masculinity.[38] In emphasizing divine immanence, feminist theology frequently tends in the direction of panentheism, implying a certain ontological continuity between God and the world to which

[36] J. Budziszewski, *On the Meaning of Sex* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2014), 61.
[37] Donald Bloesch, *Is the Bible Sexist?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1982), 70. There are some aspects of Bloesch's argument with which I would disagree. In addition to his Barthian view of Scripture, he attempts to ground masculinity and femininity in the immanent Trinitarian relations.
[38] Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 197: "If 'connectedness' describes women's experience of embodiment, then 'externally focused' is the way I would describe the equivalent male experience." This also corresponds to the "integration/differentiation" gender trait-pattern difference identified by Stephen Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ* (Bloomington, IN: Warhorn Media, 2021) 388–398; a woman's internal orientation tends toward a more integrated psychology, whereas a man's external orientation tends toward a more differentiated or compartmentalized psychology.

God "gives birth." Masculinity, on the other hand, is especially apt to symbolize creation ex nihilo, since creation proceeds not from God's "womb" but from his word.[39] Masculinity thus signifies externality or transcendent "otherness" in a way that femininity does not. Of course, God is also immanent, but his transcendence is still primary, with immanence best conceived as a divine movement "toward" creation rather than simply a static presence "in" creation.

2. **Initiative vs. responsiveness.** This principle naturally follows from the chronological priority of masculinity, expressed in the parallel between God's priority over creation and Adam's priority over Eve. Adam's mission came first, and Eve was created to support him in his mission. This distinction is also reflected in God's initiative in entering into covenants with humanity. It also accounts for the general pattern of men's goal orientation, in contrast to women's personal need orientation.[40]
3. **Authority vs. submission.** This is a fundamental gender distinction, though egalitarians are resistant to acknowledge it.[41] Yet if God is the supreme authority and has intentionally revealed himself in masculine terms, then it follows that men would be more apt representatives of his authority than women. Of course, this does not imply that all men have authority over all women, or that women may never exercise authority over men in any circumstances, but it does explain why those offices that are instituted to communicate divine authority are reserved for men only.[42]
4. **Strength vs. tenderness.** In this case, there is a much more obvious connection between biology and gender. God has designed men with general-

[39] Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods,'" 8–9; Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity*, 29–41; Cooper, 205; John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 384. Even Peeler, 114, who stridently denies the connection between divine transcendence and masculinity, concedes this point: "Earlier I noted that God does not create like men conceive, but God's distinction from creation *is* aptly pictured in the difference between men and women *with regard to pregnancy*. God, like a father does, stood distinct from creation and did not carry it within the divine being."

[40] Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ*, 398–402.

[41] The connection between masculinity and authority is conspicuously absent in Achtemeier and Cooper's treatments. Peeler, 106, objects: "Not all the faithful interpret the biblical text to demand that only men should lead. Hence to demand that God's sovereign initiation be described as masculine is to assume a consensus that does not exist." But this begs the question: are those who deny men's leadership really interpreting the biblical text faithfully? By Peeler's standard of absolute consensus, no single doctrine could ever be established as orthodox, because every doctrine has been challenged by someone at some point in church history.

[42] Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 384–385. Bloesch, *Is the Bible Sexist?*, 79: "Patriarchy preserves the biblical principle of an above and a below, of a first and a second, of headship and servanthood." Kreeft, "Sexual Symbolism": "God is masculine to everything, from angels to prime matter. That is the ultimate reason why priests, who represent God to us, must be male."

ly greater muscle mass, higher bone density, and a stronger cardiovascular system — all of which translates into greater physical strength. This makes men a clearer expression of God's omnipotence. It also accounts for men's particular orientation to the martial virtues, such as vigilance, perseverance, and courage (see 1 Cor 16:13).

5. **Discipline vs. nurture.** A central teaching of Scripture is how God disciplines us the way a father disciplines his son (Prov 3:11–12; Heb 12:5–11). Authors Katy Faust and Stacy Manning similarly note how fathers reflect "the world" to their children, while mothers reflect "the home."[43] Fathers teach their children through failure and consequences, in order to foster a sense of agency and a readiness to engage the adult world. Mothers, on the other hand, tend to respond intuitively to the physical and emotional needs of their children in order to create a safe and secure environment. Of course, God relates to us in both modes, but fatherly discipline is a more fitting description of Christian sanctification.
6. **Linear vs. cyclical.** God can also be regarded as primarily masculine in his ordering of time.[44] Since men are more task-oriented and mis-

[43] Katy Faust and Stacy Manning, *Them Before Us* (Brentwood, TN: Post Hill Press, 2022), 61.
[44] Achtemeier, "Exchanging God for 'No Gods,'" 11–13.



> sion-focused, they approach time from a more linear perspective, with a definite beginning and end. This corresponds to the biblical progression of salvation history in creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. On the other hand, in ancient pagan fertility cults, goddess worship was commonly ordered according to a cyclical pattern, corresponding to both the agricultural seasons and a woman's menstrual cycle.

If this list accurately captures the meaning of masculinity and femininity — in a suggestive rather than exhaustive manner —, then it provides us with a coherent and unifying rationale for God's self-revelation as masculine, Christ's incarnation as a man, and Scripture's commands on gender roles. Although gender does not belong to God in an absolute sense (*in se*), masculinity is nevertheless a more fitting expression of God's character as understood in relation to creation (*ad extra*).[45]

ANSWERING OBJECTIONS

This view of gender is likely to raise objections, two of which I will address here. First, some might object that my definitions of masculinity and femininity are stereotypes, which are based on sweeping generalizations that deny each individual's uniqueness. Now I recognize that my definitions are generalizations; there are circumstances when it is warranted for men to act in ways typically associated with femininity, and for women to act in ways typically associated with masculinity. That's why my primary-secondary distinction is important. I would also highlight that not all stereotypes are the same. Some stereotypes are culturally contingent, such as the color blue being associated with boys and pink being associated with girls. Other stereotypes are positively sinful, such as the notion that true manhood is defined by sexual conquest of women. And yet other stereotypes are rooted in universal human nature, transcending historical and cultural boundaries. It is this latter type of stereotyping that I believe characterizes gender, properly understood.

The second possible objection is that this view of gender is

[45] The language of "fittingness," "suitability," and "congruence" is a recurring theme in medieval scholastic treatments on Christ's incarnation as a man rather than as a woman. See Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, III, d. 12, q. 3, a. 1, ad 2: "It should be said that we are not speaking here of God's power, because he was able to assume any sort of body that he wished. However, we are speaking of fittingness, since Christ came as a teacher and ruler and champion of the human race, which are not things appropriate to a woman. Therefore neither was it appropriate that he assume the female sex."

demeaning to women, treating them as inferior or less godlike than men. In reply, I would emphasize the importance of grounding our notions of equality in Scripture rather than in contemporary culture. There is a long tradition of Christian reflection on the equality of men and women as divine image-bearers, and it's worth paying attention to the wisdom of past generations. Francis Turretin defines the image of God as consisting of three parts: human nature (spirituality and immortality of the soul), original righteousness (which was lost in the Fall but restored by grace), and the dominion and immortality of the whole person.[46] With respect to the first and second parts, men and women are the same. With respect to dominion, Turretin writes, "Now it was a dominion common to both (with respect to other creatures) although the man had it peculiarly (because having power over his wife, in which sense the man is called singularly the image of God, 1 Cor. 11:7)."[47]

This is why I described *dominion* as the end toward which masculinity and femininity are oriented. If we are to honor the inspired and inerrant biblical text, then we have to recognize that men and women stand in different relations to divine dominion: man is "the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man" (1 Cor 11:7). And yet this does not make one gender inherently more worthy of dignity or respect than the other. As Petrus Van Mastricht succinctly puts it, "Not only the male bears the image of God, as some wrongly gather from 1 Corinthians 11:7, but also the female, although with respect to his universal dominion, even over the female, the male alone is said by the apostle to be the image of God."[48]

We intuitively recognize that some people reflect certain divine attributes more directly than do others. An adult reflects divine wisdom more directly than a child. A ruler reflects divine authority more directly than a private citizen. And yet we all share a common essential humanity. In *The Four Loves*, Lewis distinguishes between two ways of being near to God: nearness of resemblance and nearness of approach.[49] Just because men may more closely resemble God in their masculinity, that does not mean that they have deeper spiritual communion with him. And despite their natural differences, men and women share a common spiritual inheritance in Christ (1 Pet 3:7). They are therefore morally and eschatologically equal.

[46] Turretin, *Institutes*, V.X.VI (1:466).
[47] Turretin, *Institutes*, V.X.XXII (1:469).
[48] Petrus Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, 1.3.9.II (3:251).
[49] Lewis, *The Four Loves* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2017), 5–6.

CONCLUSION

There's a reason why C.S. Lewis purists refuse to follow his publishers' decision to call his science fiction novels *The Space Trilogy*. The novels themselves repudiate the very idea of "space." When Ransom is taken on his first interplanetary voyage, he quickly realizes how mistaken his assumptions had been about outer space:

> 'Space' seemed a blasphemous libel for this empyrean ocean of radiance in which they swam. He could not call it 'dead'; he felt life pouring into him from it every moment. How indeed should it be otherwise, since out of this ocean the worlds and all their life had come? He had thought it barren: he saw now that it was the womb of worlds, whose blazing and innumerable offspring looked down nightly even upon the earth with so many eyes — and here, with how many more! No: space was the wrong name. Older thinkers had been wiser when they named it simply the heavens — the heavens which declared the glory. . . .[50]

One could justly argue that the modern view of gender, much like the modern view of space, has been sterilized and stripped of its cosmic wonder.[51] We've reduced it to a matter of cultural convention or individual expression. Even many Christians struggle to define it beyond simple biological sex or a narrow set of biblically prescribed roles. For Lewis, on the other hand, gender reveals a much deeper reality. It tells us something profound about our very relationship to our Creator, who is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to him. When we learn to appreciate the full significance of God's design for gender, we find ourselves in touch with the grand harmonious order of Deep Heaven.

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[50] Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, in *The Space Trilogy*, 34.
[51] For more on this point, see *Sons of Adam, Daughters of Eve: C.S. Lewis's Images of Gender* by Joshua Herring (Davenant Press, 2026), 260–264.

TODD PRUITT

Accommodation without Brakes:

How the PCUSA Traded Theological Orthodoxy for the Cultural Zeitgeist

In July of 2026, delegates at the General Assembly of the PCUSA voted overwhelmingly to pass GEN-02, also known as "On Access to Healthcare."[1] What made this such a significant moment is that the declaration (which passed by a vote of 441-30) states:

> Gender affirming care is age-appropriate care that is medically necessary and evidence-based for the well-being of many transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive people who experience symptoms of gender dysphoria or distress that result from having one's gender identity not match their sex assigned at birth.

What is more, the delegates had a vigorous debate over whether it was acceptable for their clergy to be involved in polyamorous relationships. The PCUSA has allowed for the ordination of openly homosexual clergy since 2011. In 2014 the denomination changed its definition of marriage to "two people." The proposed rule, referred to as CON-10, seeks no change in the denomination's current policies regarding homosexuality. Rather, it specifically addresses the propriety of polyamorous relationships, arguing that multi-partner sexual relationships create "power imbalances, emotional harm, and spiritual confusion," particularly for women, children and other marginalized persons.

The rule seeks to forbid clergy from entering a relationship with multiple sexual partners not because such an arrangement is inherently immoral and denies the Scripture's clear teaching about mar-

[1] You can access more details here: https://myga.pc-biz.org/search/3001421.

riage and physical intimacy. The PCUSA gave up those beliefs years ago. Rather, the rule seeks to forbid the clergy from practicing polyamory because it is believed that such arrangements create "power imbalances."

The proposal faced vigorous opposition with many arguing in favor of polyamorous relationships for clergy. Indeed, the proposal was voted down and referred back to the presbytery for "further study."

How does this happen? How does a once orthodox Christian denomination become apostate? Certainly it does not happen overnight. Indeed, the seeds of the downgrade of the PCUSA were planted long ago.

At the risk of oversimplifying, I suggest that the moral collapse of the PCUSA (and the rest of the mainline denominations for that matter) can be traced to two trends.



1. MISSIONALISM SUPERSEDED DOCTRINAL CLARITY.

By "missionalism" I mean the proper impulse to reach people for Christ. The church ought to be zealous to fulfill our Lord's great commission. However, if the church's missionalism supersedes a commitment to the unerring Scriptures and a proper concern for the glory of God, then the mission will inevitably become something other than that which our Lord articulated. And, indeed, that is precisely what happened in the PCUSA.

During the 1920s and 30s, the PCUSA was at war with itself. Known as the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy, the outcome led to what the PCUSA is today. That is, with the help of moderates and accommodating conservatives, the levers of power were handed to the liberals whose actions would lead to the denomination's doctrinal downgrade, moral corruption, and massive decline.

Henry Sloan Coffin, a leader among the modernists, followed the example of Friedrich Schleiermacher in believing that doctrine must be judged by one's own experience. Coffin encouraged his church to "try the doctrine by using it. If it is of no service, let it go. If it opens your eyes, thank God for it."[2] Coffin did not believe that his subscription to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (something required of all PCUSA clergy) bound him to actually accepting the doctrines affirmed in the confession. As was the pattern of all the modernists, "interpretation of the subscription vow obviously gave Coffin a great deal of leeway in accepting the Confession. Unlike Machen, he saw no difficulty in a loose adoption of the creed."[3]

By the time the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy was in full swing, the PCUSA

[2] Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 90.
[3] Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy*, 86

had already lost the plot in terms of the mission to make converts to Christ. Pearl Buck, the famous author and PCUSA missionary to China, had abandoned such essential doctrines as the uniqueness (and perhaps even the historical existence) of Christ, the necessity of conversion, and the atonement.

Robert Speer (1867–1947), a greatly admired and beloved leader in the PCUSA, was for 46 years the Senior Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions. He was a "personally orthodox man" (Speer contributed two articles to *The Fundamentals*) who believed the PCUSA should accommodate liberals. The call to win the world for Christ, he frequently argued, must not be hindered by arguments over doctrine. Indeed, he said that the denomination's liberals were "entitled to be trusted." His accommodation of liberals extended to the point of allowing them to deny the doctrines of the virgin birth, the atonement, the miracles of Jesus, and his resurrection. To fight them on these matters would only distract from the denomination's mission to the world. It is a tragic irony that a man so singularly devoted to reaching the world for Christ sowed the seeds of his denomination's abandonment of that mission.

2. A DESIRE FOR UNITY SUPERSEDED NEEDED DISCIPLINE.

The perfected unity of God's people in the age to come is something for which we long. And yet in this fallen world and in a church that often endures the leaven of error and the incursion of false teachers, separation is at times necessary. Perhaps no two factors tested the unity of the PCUSA more than Harry Emerson Fosdick and the *Auburn Affirmation*.

Fosdick, famous for his 1922 sermon "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?," was a liberal Baptist who had been hired by New York's First Presbyterian Church as their preacher. Not only did Fosdick not affirm the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, but there did not seem to be a single Christian doctrine which he did not radically alter or dismiss entirely. His weekly presence in the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church was a scandal for many within the PCUSA. And yet the denomination failed repeatedly to discipline the church and the presbytery for fear of schism.

The *Auburn Affirmation* was a document written in 1924 and signed by over 1,200 PCUSA ministers. It was submitted as a protest against the General Assembly's action that required all clergy to affirm the so-called five fundamentals: inerrancy of Scripture, Christ's virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, Christ's bodily resurrection, and the authenticity of Christ's miracles. The signers of the *Auburn Affirmation* argued that insistence of affirmation of those doctrines was schismatic. In typical postmodern fashion, they stated that various "theories" of those doctrines were allowed within their understanding of confessional subscription. They urged the assembly to reject enforcement in order to persevere "freedom" and to avoid neglecting "a world so desperately in need of a united testimony to the gospel."

But the history of the Mainline denominations has proven that unity cannot be forged across chasms of error. Christian unity is only possible between Christians. And those who deny the most essential claims concerning Christ (his virgin birth, miracles, substitutionary atonement, resurrection, and final judgment) cannot be called Christian in any meaningful sense. Efforts to forge ecclesiastical unity under such terms only ever lower the convictions of conservatives until they become practically indistinguishable from liberals and the denomination enters a death spiral.

By refusing to discipline the New York Presbytery or the signers of the *Auburn Affirmation*, the message was clear: Denying essential Christian doctrine was not enough to earn a denominational sanction. In the end, both moderates and, ironically, a number of conservatives, frustrated efforts to apply proper ecclesiastical accountability to those

who had embraced the very errors which were tearing apart the unity and compromising the mission of the PCUSA.

During his own battle against doctrinal downgrade among Baptists in England, Charles Spurgeon offered this apt illustration:

> Some excellent brethren seem to think more of the life than of the truth; for when I warn them that the enemy has poisoned the children's bread, they answer 'Dear brother, we are sorry to hear it; and, to counteract the evil, we will open the window, and give the children fresh air.' Yes, open the window, and give them fresh air, by all means ... But, at the same time, this ought you to have done, and not to have left the other undone. Arrest the poisoners, and open the windows, too. While men go on preaching false doctrine, you may talk as much as you will about deepening their spiritual life, but you will fail in it.[4]

Just a few days ago someone forwarded me a video of Sunday services at a PCUSA church. In the video, "Vicar Jenny," a transgender pastor, used the pulpit to rebuke Jesus for the various things he said which were wrong. Could the moderates and accommodating conservatives of the PCUSA in the 1920s and 30s have envisioned such a travesty? Surely not. They never seem to be able to trace the trajectory of their efforts to link arms with liberals. They believe that their project of minimizing doctrine to just the degree they find acceptable will not succumb to the principle that an object set in motion tends to stay in motion. Meanwhile, their efforts to marginalize those unpleasant gatekeepers like J. Gresham Machen will leave them without a defense against the inevitable downgrade they helped to engineer. One lesson is clear: If you wish to arrest your denomination's downgrade, do not wait until your transgender clergy are publicly rebuking Jesus from their pulpits.



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[4] C.H. Spurgeon, An All Round Ministry (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 1973), 374

JAMES M. HAMILTON

From the Pastor's Desk: The Qualifications for Elders (1 Timothy 3:1–7)

PAUL IN EPHESUS: A WARNING TO LEADERS[1]

In Acts 19:10, we are told Paul spent two years in Ephesus, preaching the gospel. So he's there for two years, seeing people converted and seeing this church planted. Then a chapter later in the book of Acts, he's traveling. He's on his way to Jerusalem. He doesn't want to be delayed, and so he summons the elders from the church in Ephesus to come to him at Miletus, and he gives them this parting message. In the midst of those comments, he says to them in Acts 20:29–30, "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock." He's probably alluding to the way that Jesus spoke of wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt 7:15). Luke then records in Acts 20:30 that Paul says, "From among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them." He finishes his comments and tells them they will not see him again; they weep over him, most broken over the fact that they won't see Paul again.

So there's a great church planted by the apostle Paul himself, with elders he likely invested in. He tells those men that from among them will arise people speaking twisted things. When we come to 1 Timothy, Paul must address what has actually happened.

1 The following essay is an edited transcript of a sermon by James M. Hamilton at Kenwood Baptist Church in Louisville, KY on January 15, 2026.

THE PROBLEM IN EPHESUS: SHIPWRECKED FAITH AND FALSE TEACHING

The problem is that exactly what Paul said would happen has happened: some elders have made a shipwreck of the faith. As Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:19–20, "Rejecting faith and a good conscience, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan so that they may learn not to blaspheme." Those two men may have been elders in Ephesus and are likely significant sources of the false teaching Paul addresses in First Timothy. Men from the church's leadership have done what Paul warned against in Acts 20:30 — men from among them have spoken twisted things.

In 1 Timothy 1:5–6 Paul describes certain persons swerving from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith. The sincere faith in Christ produces confidence that sins have been paid for, and by the Spirit there's regenerating power that results in a purified heart, new desires, and righteous impulses. The true gospel brings about a pure heart and good conscience (1 Tim 1:5). But these elders have swerved and wandered into vain discussion (1:6); they don't even understand the Bible they profess to teach (1:7–11). Near the end of the letter (1 Tim 6:20–21) Paul warns Timothy to "guard the deposit" and "avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge" — probably Gnosticism. "By professing" such knowledge, "some have swerved from the faith" (6:21).

Paul entrusts Timothy with a charge (1:18) to advocate the true gospel in Ephesus. The leadership's departure from the gospel explains the need for instruction on proper doctrine and order throughout the letter: in prayer (chapter 2), in conduct (chapters 2–3), in relations between men and women (2:9–15), in how to treat elders and widows (chapter 5), and in leadership qualifications (chapter 3).

THE CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF 1 TIMOTHY

1:1–11, Paul's Charge to Timothy
  1:12–17, Christ Came to Save Sinners: Paul a Prototype
1:18–20, Paul's Charge to Timothy

    2:1–15, Godliness for Men and Women
    3:1–7, Elders
    3:8–13, Deacons

      3:14–15, These Things, If I Delay, Living God
        3:16, The Great Mystery of Godliness
          4:1–5, The Prophesied Apostasy
          4:6–7a, These Things, the Faith, Reject Myths
        4:7b–8, Train Yourself for Godliness
      4:9–16, Living God, Until I come, These Things

    5:1–16, Godliness for Men and Women, Older and Younger
    5:17–25, Elders
    6:1–2a, Slaves

6:2b–12, Teach These Things, Flee These Things
  6:13–19, Paul's Charge to Timothy to Charge the Rich
6:20–21, Guard the Deposit

QUALIFICATIONS FOR ELDERS

1 Timothy 3:1–7 addresses the problem of elders who have swerved from the faith by laying out qualifications for elders. In the corresponding passage (1 Tim 5:17–25) Paul gives instructions on adequate compensation for elders and on discipline. Paul is seeking to clean up disorder, reorder thinking and living, and set standards so the church can fulfill the Great Commission. To make disciples and plant churches, Ephesus — like every church aspiring to be healthy — needs qualified elders.

This passage reads as a response to specific



violations: everything mentioned here has been — and is being — violated. Paul has to declare what elders must be and must not be so that the church receives leaders who will maintain the true gospel.

STRUCTURAL SUMMARY OF 1 TIMOTHY 3:1–7

Paul starts in verses 1–2 emphasizing that leaders among the congregation need to be "above reproach" within the church and "well thought of" outside (v.7). He lists positive qualifications in verse 2: husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach. He then lists negative qualities in verse 3: not a drunkard, not violent, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money — each corresponding to the positives. Verse 6 warns against appointing recent converts, lest they become puffed up with conceit. Verses 4–5 center on household management: elders must lead their families well so they can lead the church well. Verse 7 finishes with reputation among outsiders so they do not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil.

The Chiastic Structure of 1 Timothy 3:1–7

The saying is trustworthy:
If anyone aspires to the office of overseer,
he desires a noble task.

[2] Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,

[3] not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.

[4] He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive,

[5] for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?

[6] He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.

[7] Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

"THE SAYING IS TRUSTWORTHY" AND THE GOSPEL LINK

Paul opens with "The saying is trustworthy," an expression he uses only five times across the pastoral letters. The first occurrence (1 Tim 1:15) states, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" — a direct reiteration of the gospel. The gospel is not ancestral pedigree or secret myths (1:4); it is that Christ saved sinners by his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession. In 1:13 Paul says he received mercy because he acted ignorantly and in unbelief — showing that he deserved condemnation but received mercy. This establishes that elders are to be gospel advocates: people who maintain and proclaim the true gospel.

Thus, the "saying is trustworthy" connects to the aim of qualifying elders: the church needs elders who can advocate the true gospel and keep the congregation from being led astray.

ASPIRING TO THE OFFICE OF OVERSEER: DESIRE AND CALLING

"If anyone aspires to the office of over-

seer, he desires a noble task." The word translated "aspires" refers to internal desire and seeking to become qualified — not to an extraordinary audible call like Moses' burning bush or Abraham's specific command. Paul is not referring to sensational calls; he speaks of aspiration that won't let one rest: a desire to serve, to get equipped, to be placed in position to serve.

The same Greek word appears in 1 Timothy 6:10 (translated "craving" with reference to the love of money), suggesting a contrast: some crave riches and wander from the faith, while elders should aspire to serve and must not be lovers of money. Aspiring to oversight is affirmed by Paul as noble, provided pride is checked.

Cotton Mather ("The Office of the Christian Ministry") rightly contends the Christian ministry is

> the most honourable and important, that any man in the whole world can ever sustain; and it will be one of the wonders and employments of eternity, to consider the reasons, why the wisdom and goodness of God assigned this office to imperfect and guilty man!

Aspiring to this office, when rightly understood, is therefore a noble ambition.

QUALIFICATIONS: "MUST BE ABOVE REPROACH" AND "WELL THOUGHT OF"

This brings us to Paul's primary imperatives, which he places first and last: an overseer must be "above reproach" (v.2) and must be "well thought of by outsiders" (v.7). "Above reproach" implies that if the person were caught suddenly, there would be nothing shameful or disqualifying — no behavior that would cause reproach. Being "well thought of by outsiders" guards against public disgrace that can be used by the devil as a snare.

POSITIVE QUALITIES (V.2) — INTERRELATED VIRTUES

Verse 2 lists interrelated positive traits: "He must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach." These statements comprise a chiasm unto themselves:

above reproach,
    the husband of one wife,
        sober-minded,
            self-controlled,
        respectable,
    hospitable,
able to teach,

The qualifications that such a man be "above reproach" corresponds to "able to teach" and together they form non-negotiable standards. "Husband of one wife" likely means faithfulness in marriage; it ties to hospitality and a household ordered by the gospel. "Sober-minded" and "self-controlled" indicate level-headedness (not a drunkard), which in turn leads to being respectable and hospitable. These strengths of character are not special or elite requirements but reflect the expectations for all Christians found elsewhere in the New Testament.

NEGATIVE QUALITIES (V.3) — WHAT ELDERS MUST NOT BE

Verse 3 articulates what elders must not be: not a drunkard, not violent, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. Here again, these qualifications comprise a chiasm:

not a drunkard,
    not violent
        but gentle,
    not quarrelsome,
not a lover of money.

Paul seems to link drunkenness and love of money to idolatry — seeking satisfaction in something other than God.

"Not violent" and "not quarrelsome" pair

with the call to gentleness. The Greek term for "gentle" conveys not insisting on every right of the letter; it denotes yielding, kind, courteous, and tolerant behavior. Proverbs 19:11 and 20:3 correspond with this gentleness: good sense makes one slow to anger; it is an honor to keep aloof from strife. Paul's gentleness opposes legalistic, overbearing insistence on correctness.

HOUSEHOLD LEADERSHIP (V.4–5) — PRACTICAL PROOF OF CAPACITY

Verse 4: "He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive." The Greek term for "manage" carries imagery of standing before the household and ruling it well — the same term appears in 1 Timothy 5:17 about elders who rule well. "Keeping his children submissive" uses military-style language — children under orderly subjection. The rationale is stated in verse 5: if a man cannot manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? If a man can't exercise discipline and instruct his own children, he will be unprepared to guide, correct, or discipline the congregation.

NOT A RECENT CONVERT (V.6) — AVOIDING PRIDE AND CONDEMNATION

Verse 6 warns against appointing a recent convert: a newly planted believer can become "puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil." An immature believer is susceptible to pride, which can upset both church life and one's spiritual footing. The Greek construction can be read as a caution — "lest he become puffed up" — highlighting the risk of overconfidence in new converts.

REPUTATION AMONG OUTSIDERS (V.7) — GUARDING AGAINST DISGRACE

Verse 7: "Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil." The devil aims to ensnare pastors via dis-



grace. A good reputation among outsiders does not imply sinless perfection but shows a readiness to repent, apologize, and make things right when one errs. This external reputation functions as a protective boundary for ministry.

CONCLUSION: ABOVE REPROACH INSIDE, NOT DISGRACED OUTSIDE

We can summarize the qualifications for pastors with the following chiastic précis:

Above reproach inside the church
    Not idolatrous or violent but gentle
        Leading family well
        Leading church well
    Not immature and proud
Not disgraced outside the church

An elder must be above reproach inside the church and not disgraced outside. He must not be idolatrous or violent; he must be gentle; he must lead his family well; he must not be immature or proud.

Christianity is fundamentally imitative: believers look to examples. Jesus taught that those who would follow Him must take up their cross; Paul calls for imitation — "Imitate me as I imitate Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). Paul presents himself as a prototype (1 Tim 1:16): a man once an enemy who received mercy to display Christ's patience as an example. He calls Timothy to be an exemplar: "Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example" (4:12); and Peter says elders are to be "types" or prototypes for the flock (1 Pet 5:3).

Paul teaches in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 that churches must have qualified elders who proclaim the true gospel and serve as examples, men whom the members of the congregation can imitate.

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"These strengths of character are not special or elite requirements but reflect the expectations for all Christians found elsewhere in the New Testament."

DREW SPARKS

Anthropology, Action, and Attraction:

A Constructive Account and Critique of Preston Sprinkle and Gregory Cole's Position Paper on Same-Sex Attraction

INTRODUCTION

The *Center for Faith and Sexuality* published a pastoral paper by Preston Sprinkle and Gregory Coles (henceforth, SC). The title of the paper states the question the authors aim to answer, "Is Same-Sex Attraction a Sin?" They answer "no." I contend that this incorrect answer stems from the authors' inadequate view of anthropology and action, which leads to exegetical and theological errors. In what follows, I offer a brief overview of the paper. Then, I construct an account of anthropology and action that provides the necessary categories to think through same-sex attraction (SSA) and moral acts. With these categories in place, I critique SC's view of anthropology and action by arguing that it undermines their exegetical work, leads to heinous conclusions, reduces man to an irrational beast, misunderstands Christ's temptations, and fails to rightly account for the role of the mean in moral reasoning. Finally, I offer pastoral insights properly suited to help believers overcome SSA temptation, rightly order heterosexual sexual desire, think correctly about singleness, and maintain ecclesial unity.

ANALYSIS

SC begin their paper by noting the shift that has occurred in evangelicalism over the past decade and a half. According to the authors, there was a time in the early 2010s when certain individuals, such as

Kevin Deyoung and Rosaria Butterfield, once denied that SSA temptations were sinful but have since changed their view. Despite these shifts, SC contend that the Bible prohibits Christians from creating a list of sins not sanctioned by Holy Scripture. Since SSA temptations are not sinful, believers should not be called to repent of these temptations. In order to make their case, they examine the language of attraction, exegete biblical texts, clarify areas of confusion, and conclude with pastoral reflections. My analysis follows the order of their presentation.

SC describe sexual attraction along the same lines as the American Psychological Association's definition of sexual orientation. They write, "When we talk about 'attraction,' we're talking about what the American Psychological Association calls 'sexual orientation': 'an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes'" (4). Succinctly put, "Sexual attraction simply means that when a person experiences a sexual temptation, it will be toward a specific group of people" (4). According to their position, one can resist acting on their attractions or lusting, both of which would be sinful, but this does not change that the person is fundamentally SSA, a state that requires no repentance and is not sin in itself.

SC then develop their biblical case. They explore Matthew 6:12-13, James 1:2-4, 12-15, Hebrews 4:14-16, and Matthew 5:27-28. While interpreting these passages, they rely on the axiom that "temptation calls for resistance, not repentance" (7). Temptation does not give way to sin unless one acts upon it (8). Along the way, they reject the distinction between internal and external temptation (11). The temptations themselves are involuntary whereas lust or the external action involves the consent of the will. Jesus and Paul condemn acting upon these temptations but not the temptations as such. Those who maintain that SSA is a sin and condemn those unwilling to call it such are at risk of promoting another gospel, rendering them akin to the Judaizers in Galatians.

When SC address the confusions and complexities surrounding SSA, they seek to disambiguate key terms. These terms include actual and indwelling sin; concupiscence; internal and external temptation; desire, attraction, and lust. They also raise but then punt on the question of whether Jesus had an unfallen human nature.[1] Ultimately, SC arrive at three important conclusions. First, the distinction between indwelling and actual sin is unhelpful because it obscures those acts of which Christians ought to repent (20). The same may be said of concupiscence. Instead, they prefer *epithumia*, the Greek term behind our English word *lust* and its Latin equivalent *concupiscentia*. Second, internal and external temptation fail to account for Jesus' temptations, so this distinction is likewise rejected. Third, they maintain that desire is akin to attrac-

[1] Unfortunately, this pattern persists throughout SC's paper. Whether discussing Romans 7, Christ's fallen nature, or concupiscence, they refer to fundamental theological and exegetical points as "theorizing" or acknowledge that they are "debated," or state that the issue won't be "settled" (18, 19). A clear presentation need not address every issue, but it should at least demonstrate an awareness of the consequences of adopting certain positions. One could reject John Owen and side with Pelagius' interpretation of Romans 7, but why should one interpret the Bible like a heretic? One could theorize about Christ's humanity, but shouldn't Christ's impeccability be upheld? And how might this line of thinking change the way we view his temptations and ours? If they reject impeccability, they should simply state why and how that affects their understanding of temptation. Yes, concupiscence is a difficult debate, but shouldn't one explain the difference between theological and philosophical understandings of concupiscence in order to understand how it became a theological term that describes the pervasive and perverting nature of sin? Furthermore, what are the consequences of agreeing with Pelagius on Romans 7 and Rome on the doctrine of concupiscence? Surely implications surrounding the doctrine of justification by faith alone are at stake. But these implications are never explored.

A principled paper differs from a minimalist paper. A principled paper can outline positions so that readers can discern what views follow as entailments. A minimalist paper loosely joins atomistic ideas together without providing readers with a coherent way of thinking. While some find this latter option pious and humble, pastors and scholars should labor more diligently to follow the God of peace rather than produce confusion (1 Cor 14:33).



tion. Desire and attraction are synonyms and appear neutral. Jesus, after all, desired to have the cup of suffering removed from him but this was neither lust nor a sinful action (23). They contend that distinctions should be drawn from and adequately account for the data of Scripture.

The paper concludes with five pastoral reflections. First, repentance should only be called for where there is sin. Since SSA is not sin, believers should not be called to repent of temptations insofar as lust or external action are absent. Second, they reject calls for SSA Christians to find the answer in marriage. If the sexual appetite is oriented toward members of the opposite sex, as SC claim Jared Moore and Rosaria Butterfield argue, this leads to the absurd conclusion that the sexual appetite must be *fully* satisfied. This requires marriage and a commitment to as much sex as the appetite directs, lest the Christian have an appetite that was tempted to be satisfied but left unfulfilled (25). Third, those who require SSA Christians to alter their orientation add unbiblical requirements that simply do not work. Fourth, Christian freedom does not consist in freedom from temptations, but freedom to resist lust and external actions associated with temptations. Any insinuation otherwise results in hopelessness and heaps burdens upon those with temptations. Fifth, and finally, disagreements on these matters should not create disunity in Christ's body. Christ prayed for unity. Differences on this matter should not erect a barrier in Christian fellowship.

SC offer a proposal that aims to exegete Scripture, interact with theological concepts, engage historical and contemporary language, and offer pastoral reflection. Unfortunately, their account misses the mark as I demonstrate in my response.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND ACTION: A CONSTRUCTIVE ACCOUNT

I agree with SC in some respects. Language has been muddied. Changes have

occurred in the past several years.[2] However, I disagree on the method used to determine which language is helpful and whether the changes have been for the better. In what follows, I offer a constructive account of anthropology and action that I hope corrects their view and clarifies language in future conversations.

ANTHROPOLOGY, NATURES, AND TELEOLOGY

Language of orientation, attraction, and desire will always suffer when unmoored from philosophical concepts, such as nature and teleology.[3] Contemporary conversations reduce these terms to the intentions of the mind and desires of the individual as if orientation is purely siloed to a first-person subjective account of reality.[4] This account understands orientation solely as the desire the particular person experiences without attention to the broader philosophical picture. Desire, attraction, and orientation become synonymous with what a person longs for in the recesses of their mind or heart.

This view becomes plausible if we reject the notion that humans have natures ordered to particular ends, which would be considered a third-person objective account. On this account, orientation, inclination, intention, and purpose are not determined by the particular subject, but by the *telos* or end of human nature as such. The subject ought to recognize that their orientation is determined by *what* they are and then conform their mind to their nature with delight. SC reduce their account of humanity to the intentions of the mind, a first-person subjective account, rather than the ordering of human nature, a third-person objective account. Why should we accept SC's assumed account of human nature?

We shouldn't. The world doesn't work this way. SC's vision of reality fails to account for reality itself. By way of example, consider trees. Trees are *oriented* to dig deep roots into the ground and *inclined* to spread their branches to receive nutrients necessary for life. They also *intend* to distribute seeds upon the earth where they might be received and nourished by the soil. This is the natural *telos* of trees. Since trees have a vegetative soul, they lack consciousness to reach their end. Their orientation and inclination arise apart from subjective desires and are revealed in their nature.

The organs of the human body serve as another example. The stomach is for food. It receives and digests food so that nutrients might be extracted and the body strengthened. This is the natural *telos* of the stomach. Although the stomach belongs to those with instincts, such as dogs, and rationality, such as humans, the workings of the stomach are not directed by instinct or rationality.[5] Organs and trees lack consciousness but not *telos*. They are ordered and inclined to ends that complete their nature.

[2] The language of "change" is unhelpful, but it's SC' term. I would argue that the "changes" noted by SC are only considered changes in light of our contemporary dialogue as measured by the past few decades. It is better to identify these changes as returns. Individuals who have repented forsook contemporary confusion to return to the old paths.

[3] Although I am not making a biblical case for these concepts, I think Jesus' words in Matthew 7:17 indicate that these philosophical notions are operative in Scripture. A tree is a substance that produces fruit. A tree is still a tree whether the fruit is good or bad as it has the same nature or essence. The language of "good" and "bad" in the text indicate that a tree has either lived up to and acted in accordance with what it is, or whether it has failed through some deformity or privation (the lack of a good a thing ought to have given its nature). Jesus aptly shifts from metaphysical goodness to the goodness of the tree and its fruit to moral goodness. This should lead one to conclude that moral goodness is a subset of metaphysical goodness.

[4] The concept of first-person subjective and third-person objective accounts is indebted to David Oderberg. See Oderberg, "The Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Law" in *Natural Moral Law in Contemporary Society* (Washing, DC: Catholic University of America, 2010), 72–73.

[5] On this point it helps to distinguish acts of a human and human acts. Acts of a human are those acts of the human body not ordered by rationality. This would include the growth and loss of human parts like teeth or hair. Human acts are properly human because they are ordered, whether potentially or actually, by rationality. They are distinctly human. Even though the dog and the human have stomachs and eat, the manner in which humans eat ought to conform to their rationality. This includes

In order to discover the nature of the thing in question, such as a tree or stomach, we observe the objects upon which it acts and discern the operations by which it acts. These operations demonstrate the powers of the thing in question, for an operation cannot occur without a power. Trees possess the power to bear fruit and stomachs the power to digest food. Trees do not see because they lack the power of sight, as do stomachs. The absence of the power of sight demonstrates that the tree and stomach do not operate on visible objects *as* objects of sight.[6] Once powers are understood in light of their operations, we may then discern *what* the particular thing or nature in question is.

The language of "nature" refers to *what* a particular thing is as discerned by how it acts, also known as a principle of action. By their nature birds fly, dogs bark, trees grow leaves, and stomachs digest food. When thinking about "nature" we should avoid two errors. First, "nature" can be used simply to describe things as they are. On this view, one can see in nature that bad trees bear bad fruit. Even though bad fruit exists in nature, it *ought* not to be this way. A tree ought to bear good fruit, otherwise it is a deformed tree. Likewise, a kidney ought to filter fluid and release it into the bladder. When it fails to do so, the kidney is described as "bad" or "deformed."[7] Nature, according to its precise philosophical meaning, refers to the particular essence of a thing.[8] Nature can be used broadly to include all created things insofar as they have finite natures but, in this instance, we are using it technically of those things that have particular natures ordered to ends, such as trees, dogs, and humans. The second error to avoid is placing nature and creation in competition — as if we must choose one or the other. This dichotomy need not exist. When speaking of homosexual relations, Paul does not feel the need to refer back to the very beginning to demonstrate that they are contrary to God's design, as if one must be in possession of Genesis 1–3 to explain the sinfulness of homosexual relations. He simply deems homosexual acts as acts against human nature (Rom 1:26–27).[9] That is, these acts are contrary to the essence of humanity as discerned

praying before you eat, fasting for disciplinary or spiritual purposes, and waiting for others to get their food as a polite gesture. We see that reason elevates the powers that humans share with dogs. For example, dogs and humans procreate. Humans choose spouses, promise each other in marriage, make vows, and engage in the conjugal act with dignity as they procreate. These are distinctly human acts because they are able to be ordered by rationality.

[6] Trees act on visible objects that humans can see but they do not act upon the object as a thing the tree sees. The tree does not "look" at the ground before it drops the acorn even if you watch the acorn fall from the tree onto the ground.

[7] Here, we would say that the kidney has a privation; it lacks a good it ought to have evidenced by its failure to function in accordance with *what* it is, or its nature. The notion of privation is a philosophically defensible and theologically necessary concept. The rejection of evil as a privation makes evil a substance either created by God or by the creature. In order for privation to serve its proper place in philosophical and Christian theological discourse, Christians must deny that a gap exists between "is" and "ought." The "is" here is the form of a thing, or its nature. The "ought" is a good that a thing ought to possess or successfully actualize given its nature or form. Christians must affirm privation lest they fall into the error of Manicheanism. As an entailment, they should also reject what is commonly called the "is-ought fallacy" or the "naturalistic fallacy." John Frame serves as an example of someone who affirms that a gap exists between "is" and "ought" as he follows David Hume on this point. He believes that reasoning to an "ought" from an "is" succumbs to fallacious reasoning. Consequently, he also denies the theory of privation. See, John Frame, *The Doctrine of God,* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 163–168; John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 95–96. For a better path forward on privation, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 3:140. Thomas Goodwin applies this reasoning to Paul's words in Romans 7:18 where Paul speaks of the lack of good dwelling within him. He writes, "He says, there was no good in him; a privation therefore it is of all good and grace, and therefore a sin; for, *privatio est carentia entitatis debita inesse*, it is a want of something in the subject, which ought to be there. If, therefore, this good ought to be there (else it is not a privation of it), then it is a sin, for it ought to be there by the law of God." Thomas Goodwin, *An Unregenerate Man's Guiltiness before God*, vol 10 of *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021), 56.

[8] For biblical texts that support this precise meaning, see Romans 11:24; Galatians 4:8; 2 Peter 1:4. As I will demonstrate below, Scripture connects nature and teleology in passages such as Romans 1:27–28.

[9] The Bible does refer back to creation and Christians can and should follow this pattern. One need only look to our Lord's teaching on marriage in Matthew 19:3-12. I believe Paul's point is similar to the point I make here. One can merely look at what a human is and discern that certain acts conform to human nature whereas other acts contradict it. The "is" referred to here simply is human nature. One need not be able to trace everything chronologically through history by the light of faith to discern how things once were in order to know how they ought to be. The nature of the thing in question is sufficient to

in the *telos* of the sexual act. Creation refers to the origin of all things and nature to the essence of the thing that has an origin and is knowable through its operations.[10]

Let us consider human nature. Humans are rational animals. They belong to the genus known as animality by virtue of their bodily powers. Their specific difference, which identifies their species, is rationality. Rationality is the ability to understand by forming concepts, judge by separating and joining concepts together, and reason — properly so-called — by engaging in causal analysis.[11] The specific difference of rationality ought to inform how we employ our animality as we pursue ends fitting to our nature.

Humans pursue these ends by acts of the will, one of the three appetites humans possess. An appetite is a power that moves toward objects that satisfy its end. The will is called a rational appetite because it follows what reason reveals to be good. This occurs when the will puts the intellect of man to work so it might find a satisfying good. The intellect finds that which appeals to the will and directs it to that object. The good pursued by the will may be an actual good that completes man's nature. Sometimes, the will does not pursue what is actually good, but only that which is perceived as good. This is because the will never pursues evil *as* evil but only that which is evil because it perceives it as good.[12]

The other two appetitive powers are the concupiscible and irascible appetites. These appetites are called sensible appetites, as opposed to the rational appetite that is the will, because they concern sensible goods. The concupiscible appetite concerns the simple goods of life often associated with taste and touch, or food and sex respectively.[13] The irascible power concerns goods that are difficult to obtain and require courage. A mother who gives birth to a child is a great example. She endures pain and hardship, not for her own sake, but to receive a good on the other end. The concupiscible and irascible appetite are indirectly influenced by reason whereas the will is essentially rational. These latter two appetites may, and should, be elevated and regulated by reason such that we do not use our animal powers in a manner similar to brutish beasts.[14]

instruct in natural matters. The intelligibility of the created order as discerned from below by rational creatures should lead one to look upward to the Maker of all. This requires an effect-to-cause kind of reasoning wherein one can discern the intelligibility in the effect and understand something about its cause. This vertical reasoning follows a pattern that works from below to above rather than requiring that one reasons chronologically backward to the creation account in order to understand what is manifest before their eyes in the present. There are many things that eye has not seen and ear has not heard (1 Cor 2:6–10). These things are received by faith. There are other things that are seen, heard, and have entered into the heart of man. These are taught to us by nature and discerned through sound reason. See Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol 2, trans by George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), XI.ii.17. Henceforth, *IET*.

[10] The argument that a particular nature has an origin need not make reference to Genesis 1–3. An argument from Genesis 1–3 is horizontal as it is chronological, historical, and places an emphasis on time. These can be helpful arguments either employed in service to faith or as an argument from faith that depends upon revelation in Scripture. One can also make vertical arguments. These are philosophical and consider the essence of the thing in question. Since the particular essence, as it exists now, is not the reason for its own existence, it is dependent upon another for its being. The dependence is not merely a chronological dependence through time, but the acknowledgement that the nature in question possesses a derived existence that simply cannot be explained by something temporally prior that also has a derived existence. All that which has a derived mode of existence can only be explained by that which is existence or being itself. This is God (Exod 3:14).

[11] Elsewhere, I offer a brief and accessible anthropology that develops these and other related themes. See "The Constitution of Man: An Examination of Monism, Dichotomy, and Trichotomy." In *Eikon* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2025): 48–57.

[12] Judas committed high treason when he betrayed the God-man, but he did so for the sake of an apparent good. His actions were evil. He misperceived the good and handed over the Lord of Glory. Turretin argues that we only pursue evil *as good*, which is the most "commonest principle" impressed upon our nature. See Turretin, *IET*, XI.i.20; XI.ii.17.

[13] My treatment of concupiscence is indebted to Francis Turretin. See Turretin, *IET*, IX.xi.19-22. There, he distinguishes between concupiscence discussed philosophically as an appetite and theologically and popularly to speak of original sin. In this essay I am using it philosophically. For Turretin's philosophical use of the term, see *IET*, XI.xxi.1.

[14] Thomas Goodwin represents a Reformed theologian who articulates this basic and widely held conception of human

Because rationality consists in having an intellect and a will, humans ought to order themselves to ends that complete or perfect their nature. The stomach ought to receive and digest food, but it can fail to do so. If the stomach's failure occurs apart from the human will, this is evil or bad, but not sin. Sin properly belongs to humans insofar as they can order their ends by rationality. Those with a deformed stomach cannot use their reason and will to repent of their stomach's failings with the hope of restoration because the stomach is not ordered by reason. Medical intervention is required and reason can direct one to that end. The failure of the stomach is involuntary.[15] Corruption or deformity of the stomach results in poor stomach function. In order to restore stomach function, doctors must treat the underlying conditions detrimental to the stomach's performance.

A human would be in sin if they filled their stomach by voluntary and deliberate action with destructive objects not suited to the stomach or refused to preserve their health by filling their stomachs in a disproportionate manner. Destructive objects are the kind of objects upon which the stomach cannot act, such as a ceramic ashtray. Although a ceramic ashtray can be in the stomach, the stomach cannot perform its proper functions upon the ashtray nor distribute it to other parts of the body that can. The stomach, and related organs, will be harmed. The stomach cannot properly act upon a ceramic ashtray because it is not material suited to digestion.

Improper proportionality is measured by the necessary means to preserve and enjoy life in conjunction with the capacity and ends of the organ. It can occur when humans voluntarily and deliberately harm their bodies by supplying too much or too little nutrients necessary for health. Gluttony and anorexia serve as examples of these intemperate sins. What is considered proportionate may change throughout the various phases of life (e.g., infancy, teen years, old age) and in various circumstances (e.g., competing for a marathon, enjoying a wedding feast, or fasting for disciplinary or spiritual purposes). As rational animals, humans differ from trees, dogs, and individual organs in their ability to volitionally subvert good ends to which they are ordered by nature.

This leads to a discussion of the language of "end," "inclination," "orientation," and "teleology." As seen, these terms can be applied to trees, stomachs, and humans in general. The *telos* of a thing depends upon the thing or nature in question. Different natures have different ends. It is the end of a human to be rational because that accords with human nature. It is not the end of a human to grow leaves and drop acorns. As stated earlier, nature is a principle of action. It is the nature of a tree to grow seeds corresponding to its kind with the *telos* of growing into the fullness of a tree and producing more trees. It is the nature of a stomach to receive and digest food. When trees and stomachs act in accordance with *what* they are, their nature, they are completed or perfected as they reach their *telos*.

Telos can refer to the completion of a thing, such as a healthily formed stomach or a full-grown tree. It may also refer to the end of a particular act upon an ob-

nature. He writes, "Every man, you know, hath three lives in him: he hath the life of reason, which the reasonable soul liveth; and he hath the life of sense, which is the life that a beast liveth; and he hath the life of plants." He continues, "As the life of reason is the eminent life of a man, which a man as a man leadeth; and if you exhort a man to live as a man, you would exhort him to live the life of reason in a more eminent manner, though he exercise other acts of life too; so it is here, the eminent act of faith is to live upon the free grace of God in Christ, to live upon the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel, revealed from faith to faith." Thomas Goodwin, *The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith*, vol 8 of *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021), 301-302.

[15] In this instance, the failure of the subject's stomach does not arise from a failure of their will. Further, the failure is not in their will, but in their stomach. For these reasons, it can be called involuntary.

ject, such as digestion or growing leaves. These distinctions apply to humans as well.16 Humans grow into healthy and fully formed rational animals as the completion of their nature. They also perform certain acts that have ends, such as procreation. On account of human rationality, a further distinction is required: the ends of an agent as intended by their intellect. The intentions of the agent can and ought to correspond with the nature of the act, but this is not always the case.17 Sometimes, we can engage in an act and produce an effect intended in the act even if we did not intend the effect with our reason. Consider the phrase, "An unintended pregnancy." The sexual act is oriented to the generation of offspring even if the mind did not intend this effect or willed contrary to the effect. This is the *telos* of the act even if it is not the desire of the mind. The telos of the act is the proximate end whereas the reasons or reasoning of the agent is the remote end.

ACTION: OBJECTS, CIRCUMSTANCES, AND ENDS

Having provided a brief and basic anthropology, human action can now be considered. In action, one should consider the object, circumstances, and end of the act. The object of the act is that about which the act concerns itself. Killing, for example, is an object of an act. Not all things that kill, however, are human. Trees kill bushes. Sharks kill seals. Humans kill humans. The object of the act in these three examples is only moral in the instance of humans killing humans. We make this distinction for two reasons. First, the act of killing can have a natural effect apart from the human intellect and will, for it simply means that a life has been terminated.[18] The natural effect of an act, also considered the object, must be respected by human reason. One human cannot put a gun to another human's head, pull the trigger, and claim that they did not intend to kill the other person. The act itself tends toward killing even if the stated intention of the agent is otherwise. Second, only certain things can be killed. For example, rocks cannot be killed. They lack a principle of life. Here too, human reason must respect that certain things, such as rocks, cannot be the object of killing because of what they are. From these distinctions, one can further discern that the matter, the thing acted upon, must be able to receive the act. The rock cannot receive the act of killing for it is not a thing with a principle of life, so it cannot die.[19] A human can receive the act of killing that comes at the hands of another human. When a moral agent acts, something additional is present in reality and discernable because the human intellect and will are introduced in the act upon the object. Thus, the act of homicide is no mere natural act of kill-

[16] The distinction between the perfection of a thing and the end of an act is the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic finality. An acorn has the final cause of being an oak tree (intrinsic finality) that drops acorns and produces other oak trees (extrinsic finality). Intrinsic finality is the final cause of the efficient cause whereas extrinsic finality is the final cause that follows from the formal cause in question.

[17] Here, we can distinguish between the end of the act (the proximate end) and the end of the one who acts (the remote end). This distinction is developed further throughout the article. The two ends need not always coincide nor is it always immoral when they do not. For example, you may desire to have a rosebush planted in your front yard. You hire a landscaper to plant the rosebush in your front yard. The end of the act of planting a rosebush is the same for you and your landscaper, or it ought to be if he wishes to get paid by you. You and the landscaper wish for the rosebush to be planted. However, you want the rosebush on account of the beauty it adds to your front yard. The landscaper acknowledges the beauty and fittingness of the rosebush but plants it for the sake of earning money to provide for his employees and family. The proximate end of planting a rosebush is shared by you and your landscaper. Though the proximate end may be shared between you and the landscaper, the remote ends differ and may be many (beauty or providing for employees and family). Regardless of the remote end, you and the landscaper respect the proximate end of planting a rosebush as you seek your respective remote ends.

[18] It is helpful to distinguish between the natural species of the act and the moral species. The moral species of the act is introduced when a moral agent (with an intellect and a will) acts in accord with its nature. The natural species does not go away but is contained in the matter of the act. The natural species can be abstracted from the moral species of the act.

[19] Recall the above analogy that ashtrays cannot be digested.

ing when humans are involved. It is described as accidental when no reason for moral fault exists on either side, murder when one unjustly takes the life of the innocent, self-defense when one preserves life with due and proportionate means, and capital punishment when justly executed by the state. In all these instances, the thing acted upon remains the same, a human able to undergo death. Yet, the manner in which the human is operated upon is different because it bears a different relation to reason, respectively: accidental, innocent, unjust aggressor, justice distributed by the proper authority.

In all the above-mentioned instances of human killing, the thing acted upon remains the same, a human. The thing that is acted upon is known as the matter of the act. The manner in which it is acted upon is different in each instance, which allows us to differentiate between murder and the various other instances of killing. Here, we consider the manner in which something is acted upon, which is known as the form. The object of the act includes matter — the thing acted upon — and form — how it is acted upon.[20] Occasionally, the language of "object" can be used in a more narrow sense as another way of describing the matter. The object of the act also has its own proximate end which differs from the remote end to be discussed soon.

Every time an agent acts there are individuating features that need to be considered. The board game known as Clue assumes the object of the act, murder. Players seek to discover three circumstances that surround the act (who, where, with what?). Keeping with the theme of murder, we will identify the circumstances by adding to the traditional categories of the board game. Every human action has a where (the billiard room), when (8:37 P.M.), how (swiftly), who (Colonel Mustard), upon what (Mrs. Peacock), by what means (lead pipe), why (because Mrs. Peacock was going to expose his hidden past), and what subsequent effects (rendering Mr. Peacock a widower and her children motherless).[21]

Some circumstances touch upon mode of the act, such as where, when, and how. Others touch upon the causes of the act. The efficient cause of the act is the agent *who* brings about the change. The thing upon which change is brought about is the *what* or material cause. The instrumental cause is that *by which* the agent brings about change upon the object, such as a lead pipe. The agent's reasons or *why* is the final cause of the act. Finally, some circumstances touch upon the *effects* insofar as they refer to the thing acted upon.[22]

Circumstances can make a bad act worse, a good act better, and a good act bad. They

[20] The matter can remain the same and the form can differ. This allows us to distinguish between murder, capital punishment, and self-defense. Further, the form can stay the same and the matter can change. Stealing is the unlawful taking of that which rightly belongs to another. One can steal (the form) many things (the matter). If one steals a person, it is manstealing. If one steals a car, it is grand theft auto. When one steals in secret, it is called thievery. When one steals in an open and brazen manner, it is robbery. The form remained the same throughout. The matter changed in several instances as did the manner in which one stole the matter.

[21] The subsequent effects may be numerous as they go above and beyond the proximate end of the act itself. For example, not every instance of murder renders Mr. Peacock, or some other person, a widower. Further, Colonel Mustard's act cannot rightly be reduced to making Mr. Peacock a widower, since this could be the effect of other acts. If Mrs. Peacock ran a red light and Colonel Mustard struck her car in the intersection, he would have killed Mrs. Peacock and rendered Mr. Peacock a widower, but this would be an accident wherein the fault is rightly attributed to Mrs. Peacock. Further, Colonel Mustard could bring about this same subsequent effect in an act of self-defense if Mrs. Peacock sought to kill him in the kitchen with the dagger. Using a different analogy, stealing fifty-thousand dollars is still stealing whether it's against Elon Musk or someone who only has fifty-thousand dollars. Musk may not even notice that he lost the money but someone else may be rendered penniless. The effect upon each person is different though the act remains the same. For this reason, the effects may not come under the intention of the one who acts or serve as a reason. Colonel Mustard may not even be aware of the fact that Mrs. Peacock has children.

[22] For a helpful treatment of circumstances, see, John A. Oesterle, *Ethics: The Introduction to Moral Science* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1957), 71-74; Vernon Bourke, *Ethics: A Textbook in Moral Philosophy* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 94-98.

cannot make a bad act good. If Colonel Mustard decided to kill his father instead of Mrs. Peacock, it would not merely be murder, but parricide. Here, the matter and form remain the same — it is still murder — but the matter acted upon bears a unique relation to Colonel Mustard, making his murder worse. Circumstances can add further deformity to an act. Using a different example, giving to the poor is good but it is a better act if one gives out of their poverty (Luke 21:1–4). Performing a good act, but at the wrong time, in the wrong place, or in the wrong way, can make an act bad. Blessing your friend is a good act but it shouldn't occur with a loud voice or early in the morning lest these circumstances render the act itself bad (Prov 27:14). As may even be evident from these examples, some circumstances have no bearing upon the moral act at all. It may be true that Colonel Mustard has green eyes, but having green eyes makes no moral difference in this case.[23]

One of the above circumstances is significant enough to be treated on its own — the *why*. This is the remote end of the act, which is also known as the end of the one acting. This differs from the proximate end, which is the end of the act itself. The remote end explains why this particular agent chose the act in question. Colonel Mustard decided to find a fitting means to silence Mrs. Peacock upon discovering that she was going to expose illicit details about his past. The end of his particular action, as opposed to the ends of someone like Jeffrey Dahmer, differ. Both Dahmer and Colonel Mustard chose the same means (murder) to bring about a proximate end of death suited to their particular but different remote ends or reasons for acting. Like circumstances, the remote end of the act can't make a bad act good (Rom 3:8) but it can make a good act, such as praying or performing deeds of mercy, bad (Matt 6:1–6). Further, the remote end of the agent can make a bad act worse and a good act better.

ANTHROPOLOGY, ACTION, AND THE SEXUAL ACT

Let us apply this reasoning to the sexual act as our anthropology and theory of action converge. As a natural act, the sexual act is a procreative act.[24] For humans, it is also a unitive act. By this act and this act alone can two persons become one flesh and produce offspring. The nature of the sexual act is unitive and procreative. We can say more about this act, but we cannot say less. Because of the nature of the act, the sex of the persons (actor or subject and object) must be sexually complementary. The actor and the matter acted upon must be male and female since this alone corresponds with the nature and end of the act.[25] Up to this point, we have the necessary ingredients for the sexual act as a sexual act but not enough information to determine whether a particular act in question is moral.

One might be tempted to discuss intentions at this point, the remote end, but patience is required. Intentions cannot make a bad act good and more information is required in order to determine whether the sexual act in question is morally upright. The object of the sexual act cannot merely be considered as a natural act. It must also be considered as moral. Thus,

[23] This may be a physical circumstance, but it is not a moral circumstance. See, Oesterle, *Ethics*, 103-104.

[24] The powers involved in this act are the reproductive powers and it is the only act that tends toward the creation of life. This is true for humans, dogs, and chimps. This is similar to saying that ears are for hearing. Yes, we can say more about the things heard and all the other purposes of the ear, such as serving as a place to hang jewelry and hearing your spouse communicate their love for you, but this does not change the fact that the ear is ordered toward hearing and it is the only part of the body suited to this end.

[25] The language of "object" need not imply "objectification." A wife can be the object of her husband's affection without being objectified. Likewise, the husband can be the object of his wife's love without being objectified. The language of "object" simply refers to that which receives the action. Throughout this paper, I will use the term "object" to refer to one who is a subject or person so as not to confuse the one who acts (subject) with the one who receives the act (object).

further inquiry into the thing acted upon is required. Here, a distinction is required between circumstances that surround the object of the act and those that bear more directly upon the matter acted upon.[26] For example, does the man in question act upon a woman who is single or married to another man? Is the man in question single or married to another woman? If both are single, the sexual act is fornication by reason of its occurrence outside of any marriage bond. If one or both persons are married to another, a marriage bond is broken. This is an act of adultery. If the persons in question are married to each other, it is the conjugal act. The natural sexual act remains the same even if the moral nature of the act is distinguished by reason on account of circumstances directly bearing upon the matter acted upon. It is still the act whereby two become one flesh (1 Cor 6:16), and children are produced regardless of the circumstances that bear directly upon the matter insofar as the two are male and female.

To illustrate the difference between circumstances that directly bear upon the matter acted upon and those that do not, consider Bathsheba. When she bathes, Bathsheba does so as Uriah's wife since that is who she is. Being Uriah's wife is a circumstance that does not directly bear upon her *as one who bathes*. She bathed before she was Uriah's wife, as Uriah's wife, as David's wife, and as a widow. Those four relations have no bearing upon bathing. They are accidents irrelevant to the nature of the act itself. However, being Uriah's wife is morally relevant to the material that is acted upon by David in the sexual act.[27] Thus, the object of the act is adultery.[28]

We are now in a place where we can begin to examine intentions. If the act is fornication or adultery, then the intentions cannot make this bad act good. The most sincere and pure intentions are mired by bad acts though it is still better to have good intentions than bad intentions. Intentions can make these acts worse, for one can intend many further evils in the acts of fornication and adultery, such as spite or vengeance. These acts are not unnatural or disordered in themselves as it concerns the natural act of sex. Male and female are suitable material for the sexual act. They are disordered on account of the moral relation between the parties involved.

Human intentions cannot make adultery or fornication good but they can make a good act, the conjugal act, bad. When a husband intends to exclude his wife from the goods of the conjugal act by making her a means of his wrongfully selfish satisfaction, the good act becomes evil on account of his intentions. The same may be said when a wife uses the conjugal act to manipulate her husband and exclude him from the good of the conjugal act, making him a means of her wrongfully selfish satisfaction.

Let us examine circumstances. Some circumstances surrounding the sexual act have no bearing on the moral nature of the act. Whether the object has green eyes is irrelevant insofar as the man's wife has green eyes and the green eyes in question happen to belong to his wife. But green eyes in themselves have no bearing upon the moral nature of the sexual act since they do not touch the generative powers humans possess nor do they introduce any new form into the

[26] These are typically differentiated as *circa quid* and *materia circa quam*.

[27] Being Uriah's wife would be a mere circumstance that has no bearing on the nature of the act itself if David acted upon her as a doctor who sought to bring healing.

[28] A man having his father's wife is an act of adultery by reason of her belonging to her husband and her husband, rather than his son, belonging to her. It is no mere woman, but a married woman with whom the man in 1 Corinthians 5 has sexual relations. Yet, it is no mere married woman, but his father's wife. The circumstances directly bearing upon the matter acted upon make it an act of adultery. The circumstances that do not bear directly upon the act of adultery make the act more heinous and add further deformity to the act, making it so heinous that not even the Gentiles do it (1 Cor 5:1).



act.[29] Other accidental features irrelevant to the sexual act fail to change the moral act. Hair color, skin color, weight, height, and other accidents of the object of the sexual act do not alter the nature of the sexual act because they do not bear upon the nature of the moral act itself.[30]

Consider how some circumstances may at first glance seem benign but end up altering the moral nature of the act. In many instances, time and place appear irrelevant to the sexual act. One time of day versus another seems to have no bearing upon the morality of the act. Place may seem similarly benign. However, if the place is physically or virtually public such that others can view the act, it becomes exhibitionism or pornography. These circumstances alter the morality of the same sexual act as the participants find pleasure in becoming objects of pleasure for others outside of the conjugal union. The place is no longer rightly classified as a mere place, accidental to the act. Instead, the place changes the object of the act by making it viewable to others, not on account of mere coordinates but because the private act is now ordered by reason to public exposure.[31]

Voyeurism differs from exhibitionism even though the married couple in our example is seen in both instances. On exhibitionism, the couple uses their reason to make a private act public and expose themselves to others for sexual pleasure. If the couple's end, which is the remote end and the *why* of the agent's act, is to be seen, then the place will necessarily change so that the object of the

[29] If a woman committed adultery on her husband because she wanted to engage in sexual relations with a man who had green eyes, this would not be a mere circumstance of the act but her remote end. Insofar as she sought to have relations with a green-eyed man, she would pursue fitting material (a green-eyed man) for the act of adultery. This would no longer be a traditional circumstance that did not bear upon the nature of the act, but a remote end of the woman. The sin would still be adultery and the remote end of pursuing a green-eyed man would add the sinful deformity of vanity to her adultery. If she committed adultery with a green-eyed man but not on account of his green eyes, it would simply be a mere circumstance that has no bearing on the morality of the act.

[30] Some of these accidents may be passed on to offspring in the sexual act as the parents pass down their DNA. However, these accidents do not affect the powers of reproduction and so do not affect the act. Likewise, morality only asks if the one with these accidents is the spouse since these features in no way shape the morality of the act.

[31] The nature of the act is important. A private handshake and a public handshake have no real difference insofar as handshakes are understood in isolation. However, one could conceive of a handshake as a means of binding a contract. This would need to be public because of the nature of a contract and the necessity of witnesses for legal purposes.

act is no mere sexual act but a sexual act as viewable and exposed. The couple will find means suited to their end. On voyeurism, the couple rightly keeps the act private, but a "peeping Tom" seeks to make the couple an object of his pleasure apart from the couple's awareness and despite the couples rational ordering of their sexual acts to its rightfully private place. Thus, "being seen" is not sufficient to change the nature of the morality of the act for the couple in question. They still performed a good act. One must further inquire into the ordering of those who are seen and those who see to rightly determine the nature of the moral act rightly.

Age, like time and place, may be such that it does not alter the morality of the act. Consider a 25-year-old single male engaging in sexual relations with a 30-year-old single female, this is simply fornication. Age does not change the moral nature of the act in this instance. The act is still fornication if she is a 20-year-old. A decade changed nothing. It is a mere accidental circumstance. However, if the female is a 10-year-old, the act is pedophilia, not fornication. The difference between a 20-year-old and a 10-year-old cannot be reduced to a mere difference of a decade as in the previous instance since the nature of the moral act has been fundamentally altered. Even though the matter of the sexual act is female — a potentially suitable object of the sexual act if rational and bodily maturation occur — the age of the female *can* be such that it changes the nature of the moral act in question. In this instance, it does.

She is not a suitable subject of the sexual act at present because circumstances relating to her age reveal underlying factors that render her a presently unfit object of the act in question. Age, in this instance, directly affects the material acted upon in the sexual act. She is morally unfit to receive the act because she is not able to receive the sexual act as a natural act. She is neither intellectually, volitionally, nor bodily ready to receive the act. Accordingly, she cannot consent because she does not understand and her body is severely harmed in the act. For these reasons, pedophilia is a violation of the soul and body. When she grows into marriageable years, she becomes fit matter for the sexual act. This act must occur within the confines of marriage, otherwise it is not a conjugal act, but fornication or adultery.

The same cannot be said of same-sex relationships. Because of our animality, we will either be male or female. The two sexes complement one another in many ways, as eminently manifested in sexuality. Those of the same sex cannot engage in the sexual act with each other because it is procreative and unitive by nature. This is not because of age, as in the case of pedophilia. The female subject in question could be the proper subject of a marriage union insofar as she matures bodily and mentally.[32] The same is not true of same-sex relations. Two males cannot engage in the procreative and unitive sexual act with each other; neither can two females.[33] For this reason, persons of the same sex cannot actually marry for they cannot engage in the act requisite to the union. Same-sex

[32] This just is what makes pedophilia worse than homosexuality. The subject in question cannot volitionally enter into the act. In the case of adult homosexual relations, two persons have used their intellect and will to perform an evil deed.

[33] Some might object that married couples are not always able to procreate. Here, we must make a few distinctions. First, we must distinguish between those who can engage in the sexual act by virtue of their sex. A male and a female are the only combination that can. No other combination of persons works.

Second, we must distinguish between impotency and infertility. Impotent persons are those who cannot enter into the sexual act or render due benevolence due deformity pertaining to genitalia. Jesus classifies these persons as those who were born eunuchs or made eunuchs by man (Matt 19:12). Because these persons cannot perform the sexual act, Christians in the Puritan tradition have said that they should not marry, but remain single. See William Perkins, "Christian Oeconomie," in *The Works of William Perkins*, vol 10, eds. Joseph A. Pipa and J. Stephen Yuille (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020), 42; William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home Volume 2: A Holy Vision for a Happy Family*, eds. Scott Brown and Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), 3–4. In what follows, I summarize their arguments. Impotency differs from barrenness in many respects. Impotency is discerned in

marriage is not marriage as to its essence; it is marriage in name only.[34] A person of the same sex is not a proper object of the sexual act because they cannot act upon the other in such a way that the sexual act can be received and it can never be performed within the marriage union because it depends upon the consummation of the one flesh union which is ordered toward procreation.[35]

The circumstances surrounding the act or the object of the act fail to make it better, although they can make it worse. All pornography is heinous, but homosexual pornography includes added moral deformity since unfit objects engage in immoral acts in a virtually public manner. Age may compound the heinous nature of the act, if the act is a case of pedophilia against someone of the same sex, but it can never render a member of the same sex a fit object.

Should a male choose to engage in sexual acts with sexually mature female of a different species, this act is known as bestiality. In this instance, heterosexuality and age make no difference since the matter in question, a beast, cannot engage in sexual relations with a human on account of its inability to receive the sexual act in its body. It is unfit matter by virtue of its species. Further, it cannot share in the sexual act as a human sexual act since it lacks a rational soul necessary to elevate the sexual act to a human sexual act.

AN ADDITIONAL PIECE: HABITS

Up to this point, we have considered nature, teleology, and action. These pieces must be in place if we wish to discuss these matters with clarity. But one further component needs to be added, and this is habit. The notion of habit is often unaddressed in contemporary Protestant literature, and SC's article is no exception.[36]

What is a habit? We typically associate habits with particular acts, such as biting nails or smoking cigarettes. Historically,

the body whereas infertility is hidden within the body. Impotent persons cannot perform due benevolence whereas infertile persons can. Impotency is known prior to (*a priori*) entering into the sexual act because these deformities manifest themselves. However, infertility is known after (*a posteriori*) repeated sexual acts. Impotent persons cannot become one-flesh with another because they cannot engage in the sexual act whereas infertile persons can become one flesh even if they are unable to receive the fruit of the union. I agree with those like Perkins and Gouge who argue that impotent persons should not enter into marriage based on the nature of the union and the teaching of the Lord (Matt 19:12). However, this does not mean that those who are rendered impotent *after* marriage can be divorced. They have already promised to remain with each other for better and for worse until death. They joined themselves in a one flesh union, meaning that they cannot leave their spouse anymore than they could leave their own flesh when it is injured.

The third and final distinction lies in comparing infertile persons and same-sex unions. Same-sex couples are not necessarily infertile. There is no deformity hidden in their body that prevents them from having children. Rather, they are not an object that is able to receive the sexual act. Infertile persons are the proper subjects of the marriage union and can be one flesh even if the fruit of the union does not follow. Heterosexual couples have the potential to receive children but are unable to do so by virtue of a defect or privation. Same-sex couples have the potential to receive children but are unable to do so, not because of their bodies per se, but because they perform disordered acts. If they forsake their same-sex union and join themselves to a person of the opposite sex, they could, in theory, enter into and receive the fruit of a one-flesh union. However, homosexual acts are not unitive and therefore cannot produce children. This shifts the framing of the question from the effect of the sexual act to the nature of the sexual act that tends toward a particular effect. Same-sex couples are not fit for marriage because they cannot produce the effect by virtue of their inability to engage in the sexual act on account of incompatibility as persons of the same sex. Infertile couples can enter into the sexual act but fail to bring about the effect that follows the act due to a privation. Thus, the comparison between same-sex couples and infertile persons fails.

[34] It is appropriate to refer to same-sex marriage as a nominal marriage since it is not real marriage but one in name only. Identifying it as a nominal marriage allows us to demonstrate the heinous nature of desecrating the marriage union while retaining an essential definition of marriage that demonstrates why homosexual marriages are not actual marriages. This is how the Bible talks about other "gods." They are so-called gods or gods in name only (1 Cor 8:5).

[35] Marriage is more than the one-flesh union, but it is not less than this union. Any component that is more than the one-flesh union necessarily flows from the one-flesh union. When one vows to remain with another through sickness, they vow to remain with the one they have joined themselves to in a one-flesh union. This union is the foundation for all the other goods promised and received in marriage.

[36] This has not always been the case. Readers will find the language of habit throughout the Reformed tradition. A small sampling includes authors like Peter Martyr Vermigli, Theodore Beza, William Ames, Thomas Goodwin, Francis Turretin, John Owen, and Petrus van Mastricht. Wojciech Giertych asserts that the notion of habit as that which explains internal change is absent in the Reformed tradition ["Foreword" by Wojciech Giertych, OP, in Ezra Sullivan, *Habits and Holiness: Ethics, Theology, and Biopsychology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2021), xiii]. However, the Reformed theologians

habits have been discussed in a manner akin to SC's definition of attraction. Habits are not our nature, a principle of action, but a second nature. They are a firm and fixed disposition that confirms and directs the powers of our nature so that we freely perform certain acts with ease and pleasure. They also explain why our powers are directed to specific acts. Humans have various powers capable of bringing about all kinds of ends due to their intellectual and volitional capacities. The human intellect and will are capable of contemplating many great truths and loving the best goods as well as turning away from the truth to a lie and performing every manner of evil conceivable. In this way, we differ from animals who operate by mere instinct. Habits are guided and developed by reason. Instincts are mere repeated acts that lack rationality. For this reason, habits are properly ascribed to parts of humanity that are directly or indirectly under the control of reason.[37]

The dog eats like an animal and engages in sexual relations without a sense of decency or shame. For humans, eating is often a social act and is preceded by gratitude in the form of prayer. Humans recognize that exhibitionism and incest fail to conform to the nature of the sexual act as performed by humans. Dogs aren't exhibitionist because they lack rationality. The public nature of the sexual act between dogs is the same kind of sexual act between humans but humans are moral beings, so the act is morally different though it is naturally the same.[38] There is no shame when a dog engages in sexual relations as a dog since the dog lacks rationality. There is shame when a human engages in sexual relations as if they were a dog precisely because humans are rational. Habits help confirm and perfect the powers of man insofar as they are able to be guided and directed by rationality. Habits are distinctly human. When these human powers are confirmed and fixed in their strength such that certain actions regularly and pleasantly follow, it is called a habit.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND ACTION: A CRITIQUE

With these theological and philosophical foundations in place, a proper critique of SC can follow. SSA temptations are sinful because the matter of sexual desire is not fit to receive the sexual act from someone of the same sex. Those with SSA may be habitually attracted to members of the same sex. However, they are neither ordered nor inclined to these persons sexually since a sexual act between two persons of the same sex is always disordered by virtue of their inability to enjoy the unitive and procreative act because they are the same sex. This desire is incapable of being rightly ordered on account of the matter of the act. A desire or attraction to someone of the same sex contradicts the orientation of their human nature. The male sex is oriented to the female sex and the female sex is oriented to the male sex.[39] This is the inclination arising from human nature. As a consequence, the matter of desire is always improper material under the aspect of sexual act. It is not immoral to desire someone of the same sex as a friend, for they can be a fitting object as

mentioned in this note employ the language of habit to explain regeneration, sanctification, cardinal virtues, theological virtues, and the human nature of Christ. Giertych's claim may be true of Reformed theologians in the 20–21st Century, but it fails to account for classic Reformed theology as it developed during the Reformation.

[37] The man born blind in John 9 cannot habituate his eyes to do anything. He was blind from birth. Job, on the other hand, made a covenant with his eyes not to look lustfully upon a virgin (Job 31:1). The man born blind could not govern his eyes by reason since his eyes were deformed as to its natural act. Job employed his sound moral reason to direct his eyes away from that which was evil.

[38] "Naturally," as used here, refers to the powers involved in the act insofar as they are abstracted from morality.

[39] This should not be read subjectively as if a particular man, Solomon, is oriented toward multiple women all with names and faces. Rather, this is to be understood abstractly. Solomon, as he is a male, is oriented to the female sex rather than to particular females or every female.

a friend.[40] However, to desire them sexually simply is to desire them as an object of action that they are unable to receive. In what follows, I demonstrate how SC's failure to adequately account for anthropology and action undermines their exegetical work, leads to heinous conclusions, reduces man to an irrational beast, misunderstands Christ's temptations, and fails to account for the role of the mean in ethical reasoning.

Undermines Their Exegetical Work

SC's work to demonstrates that language of desire may be neutral is irrelevant because their anthropology and theory of action is incomplete. For this reason, SC's exegesis falls apart. Desire takes its moral shape from its object. Some objects of desire, such as food, are good, but they must be desired in the right way, at the right time, and for the right end. If any one of these is missing or deformed, the object is wrongly desired even if the object is a good object. Other objects are indifferent, neither morally good nor bad in themselves, such as walking. Finally, some objects are simply bad. This is not because the substance is bad in itself. Technically speaking, there are no bad substances. Everything created by God is good (1 Tim 4:4). As I have tried to consistently communicate throughout this article, the object is only a bad object insofar as it is considered in relation to the act it receives.[41] The object of SSA is not a proper object — or matter — of the sexual act nor can it ever be.

SC's approach claims to be biblical. They place great stock in the fact that Scripture uses the language of desire in ways that allows for non-sinful temptation. Lexically, that is fine insofar as one is satisfied to blow the dust off a surface they are unwilling to even scratch. One can only be so content if they already imbibe the philosophical notion of a first-person subjective account of humanity that prohibits the object of desire from informing the nature of desire. But this philosophically underdeveloped account of reality is ultimately unsatisfying.

By offering a truncated account of reality, SC leave important questions unanswered. Their own answer is so lexically constrained that it cannot explain why Scripture can use desire in good, indifferent, or evil ways. According to them, it just does. The question isn't even addressed. Their account is so philosophically and exegetically thin that it makes Pharaoh's seven emaciated cattle look plump.

To be precise, one should say that desire is a movement of the will — the rational appetite — toward that which pleases it.[42] If the will was repulsed by the object in question, it would move away from the object in what is known as aversion. On SC's scheme, if a movement toward a particular object is neutral so too is a movement away from an object. This seems consistent with their argument if not a consequence of their view. A person may be moved toward someone of the same sex without lusting or acting upon their desire which allows for the same person to

[40] People of the same sex can do all sorts of things together, one of which is enjoy friendship. The problem is not the same sex, but the form introduced by reason. Two individuals of the same sex, the same matter, can enjoy virtuous friendship, the pleasantries of life, and work together. The problem begins when the sexual relation is introduced. A male can receive friendship from another male but a male cannot receive a sexual act from another male because of what the sexual act is.

[41] For example, a good knife is still a good knife even if it is really bad at hammering. It is good in itself and in relation to the ends that complete it. A good knife cuts well and is able to slice a brisket. This same good knife may also be used slash a man's throat in an act of murder. For it to be considered an act of murder, the knife must be a good knife. A good murderer uses a good knife which makes him a bad person. Bad murderers use bad knives which make them bad murderers and bad persons. The sexual act is similar. A male is a good object of the sexual act for the female as the act is considered in itself apart from moral considerations. However, this act cannot be considered in isolation from morality.

[42] With Goodwin, "I will therefore, first, shew that the word lust is largely taken, and so to be understood here for the habitual inclinations, and that of all the faculties, understanding also; and so therefore inadequately to express the positive corruption of the whole man." Goodwin, *An Unregenerate Man's Guiltiness before God*, 284.

have an aversion toward someone of the opposite sex without cursing them in their mind or hurting them by an external act.

Two chief problems exist with this view of desire. First, if a desire for things that cannot lawfully be acted upon are not bad, then a desire for things that can lawfully be acted upon are not good. If the desire for an unlawful object does not reveal the sinfulness of sin then neither does the desire for a lawful object reveal the work of grace upon the soul. Neither aversion to God nor desire for God could be considered moral in itself. Likewise, aversion to pedophilia and desire for pedophilia would also be morally neutral; no movement of the will being better or worse than another. Whether one is drawn to or repulsed by the object in question is morally irrelevant to SC.

Second, "desire" may be a neutral term in the abstract, but SC wrongfully assume this means that desire is neutral in the concrete. When joined to an object and the end of the one who acts, desire is no longer indifferent, but good or evil. For example, "kill" is a neutral term in the abstract.[43] Without the object, circumstances, and end of the act, one cannot discern whether the killing is justified. Yet, each concrete act of killing is either justified, unjustified, or an accident. Desire always takes an object in the concrete and the object determines the morality of the desire along with the morally relevant circumstances and ends.

Because SC implicitly exclude the object of desire from shaping the moral act, they can write, "We cannot treat Paul's words about chosen behaviors of mind and body as if they describe the experience of sexual temptation" (13). SC beg the question here. They assume that the desire is not sinful even if the object of desire is forbidden by Paul. Further, whenever desire is described as sinful, they assume this necessitates lust. They then claim that Scripture never condemns SSA temptations because these are not a species of lust. But in doing so they've prevented Paul from speaking about sinful desires at the outset. Yet, this is the very question at hand. No lexical difference between neutral desire, good desire (1 Tim 3:1), and lust exists, which renders their exegetical work futile. They miss the obvious point of all the texts they exegete: the object desired, lusted after, or acted upon, is the sole difference in these texts. Only if they beg the question in favor of their position can they be pleased with their exegesis.

As a Christian, pastor, and theologian, I am eminently concerned with being "biblical" in my approach. For these reasons, I am also worried about exegetes who fail to recognize or acknowledge the philosophical reasoning or consequences of their position. What often passes as "biblical" is Scripture cloaked in today's unrecognized philosophical assumptions and undercooked theological reasoning. The reason desire can be used in various ways simply is because the object of desire informs the moral nature of desire itself. Once one recognizes this, one can rightly account for its varied use in the text of Scripture. Only when one rejects this notion could it possibly be argued that SSA temptations are not sinful. This philosophically underdeveloped and bare lexical approach comes at the cost of reading Scripture well.

Leads to heinous conclusions

Their account of reality and Scripture leads to heinous conclusions. Consider SC's claim that SSA temptation is not morally culpable:

> "This general rule of thumb — "tempta-

[43] Here, "kill" has been abstracted from its moral species and refers to a mere natural act.

> tion is not sin" — was readily applied to sexual temptation, including same-sex sexual temptation. That is, because the broad category of temptation isn't sin, a smaller subset of that category (sexual temptation) also isn't sin. Because sexual temptation isn't sin, an even smaller subset of that category (same-sex sexual temptation) also isn't sin. Therefore, same-sex attraction — a pattern that includes sometimes facing same-sex sexual temptation — is clearly not a morally culpable sin" (1).

SC reason as follows:

- Sexual temptation isn't sin.
- SSA is sexual temptation.
- Therefore, SSA isn't sin.

Any subset of sexual temptation, or any temptation more broadly, would not constitute sin on their view. Consider the following identical reasoning:

- Sexual temptation isn't sin.
- Child-attraction is sexual temptation.
- Therefore, child-attraction isn't sin.

One can substitute "child" with all manner of sexual temptations, including but not limited to open sexual relations, trans-attraction, orgies, dog-attraction, and the like. The logic of SC's position allows for this reasoning, leaving them on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, they can reject this reasoning and offer a better argument. On the other hand, they could bite the bullet and acknowledge their reasoning entails that all manner of sexual temptation is without sin. The embrace of this line of reasoning should be sufficient for its own refutation. Any position that spouts such ungodliness is pure folly.

Reduces man to an irrational beast

Besides the exegetical and philosophical shortcomings, SC leave readers with a tragic view of man. They treat humans like beasts by denying them the ability to reason about their sexual appetites. I am willing to grant that SSA may arise apart from an individual's reason insofar as reason is narrowly confined to a conscious choice. Sexual desire often begins in the body, as does hunger. These desires fall under the concupiscible appetite discussed earlier. However, these powers are subject to human reason, albeit indirectly. These temptations may initially arise apart from one's reasons and choices. Yet, they still happen with one's reasons and choices and, accordingly, can be submissive to the intellect and will.[44]

This raises a fundamental question. Is SSA a mere instinct of nature untouched by reason or can it be subordinated to human reason and thus guided and corrected? If the desires are absolutely involuntary, then they do not differ from a deformed stomach. The intellect and will cannot act upon or resolve the stomach deformity. In this way, SSA temptations are unalterable and deformed because, like a deformed stomach, they are against human nature.

This seems to be an inappropriate place to locate SSA temptations. The attraction component of SSA lies in the will, not according to particular acts but as it is an appetite that can be affected by goods perceived by the intellect. The will is the location of the moral defect, or that upon which sinful acts depend.[45] This is why theologians identify the affecting of the will as its "first motions."[46] The will, then, is deformed. In the case of SSA, the will is moved by matter unfit to receive the sexual act, thus it is moved by an

[44] With Goodwin, "For that which in beasts and dead things we call an inclination or instinct, in man, being a reasonable creature, we call lust." Goodwin, *An Unregenerate Man's Guiltiness before God*, 286.
[45] Turretin, *IET*, IX.ii.2, 9.
[46] Turretin, *IET*, XI.xxi.10.

unlawful object, the person of the same sex as desirable for the sexual act.[47] The movement of the will is not aversion, as it ought to be, but desire or attraction. It is a movement toward the forbidden object. If the will is moved by a forbidden object apart from an elicited act of the will, this does not render it indifferent. Rather, it says something about the person's disposition or habitude. Something within them is wrong causing them to desire something wrong.[48] Because these desires are rightly seated in or submissive to the intellect and will, they are morally culpable.[49]

SC make two errors with regard to SSA temptations. First, if desire isn't sufficient to render something sinful, from where do sinful acts of the will arise? Where do second motions of the will come from if the first motions of the will are not sinful? It would seem that the fount of sinful motions of the will can be traced back to the first motions of sinful desire. As Turretin writes, "The effect ought to correspond with the cause; nor could lust bring forth actual sin unless it is itself sin."50 This is the teaching of Christ. Good trees bear good fruit and bad trees bear bad fruit (Matt 7:17). SC want to explain good and bad fruit without a good or bad tree. Likewise, James states that bitter water flows from a bitter source and salt water does not flow from fresh water (James 2:9–12). Yet, by divorcing desire from acts of the will, SC lose any explanatory power for the change in the waters.[51]

Second, if attraction is in the will and the will follows reason, then the will is subject to change. The will is not ordered to any finite created good as *the* good.[52] Thus, it is not fixed on a particular object. It is mutable until man arrives in his fixed state in glory or hell. Until then the will can be moved away from forbidden objects and it can be directed to actual goods, rather than perceived goods contrary to human nature.

The view of man put forth by SC identifies those with SSA as Nebuchadnezzar before his reason returned to him. He is nothing but a helpless beast, unable to lift his eyes to the God of heaven and plead for God's new creation grace to rightly order his sexual desires rightly.

Misunderstands Christ's temptations

Our account also needs to consider the temptations of Christ, a point upon which SC build a significant amount of their ar-

[47] This desire need not be characterized as a desire for a particular person. It can be understood broadly as attraction to those of the same sex as desirable.

[48] These desires are what Turretin calls "broadly" voluntary. They may be rightly labeled voluntary "because it affects the will and inheres in it." Turretin, *IET*, XI.xxi.12. One typically associates voluntariness with what Turretin identifies as "strict" voluntariness, an actual movement of the will (either elicited or imperate [Turretin, *IET*, IX.ii.2, X.ii.12]). Turretin explicates this point by discussing nolition, which is a kind of involuntariness or not-willing. This occurs in two ways. The first is a positive nolition whereby one wills to not perform a certain action. If an act is involuntary in the strict sense by a "positive nolition," then the act is not and cannot be morally culpable. The second is a negative nolition. Here, the agent wills not to act when the agent should have acted. For example, imagine an adult watching an toddler drown in a bathtub. The adult would be morally culpable for their inaction, or negative nolition. See Turretin, *IET*, IX.ii.2-3. A positive nolition is an act of the will to "nill" or refuse something whereas a negative nolition is simply not refusing. Sins of negative nolition are not voluntary in the strict sense but can be morally culpable.

[49] Commenting on the "willings of the flesh" in Ephesians 2:3, Goodwin writes, "To shew that the desires, the lustings of the hearts of men, are not merely brutish, they have a tincture of will and reason in them; and though oftentimes they are involuntary, for there are many motions arise before the will is put forth, yet because they are in a creature that hath will and reason, which will and reason should be too strong for the risings of such lusts, and keep them down, hence they are called 'wills.' You shall see the same kind of lusts in beasts as in men. You shall see pride in a horse, you shall see revenge in an elephant, &c. But yet these very lusts that are the same in men with those that are in beasts, because they are in a creature that hath a will and reason to keep them down, the fault therefore of all these lusts is laid upon the will, and they are called 'the wills of the flesh and of the mind.' Take now a natural fool, between whom and a beast there is but a nice distinction in appearance; yet these lusts in him are sins, not in the other, because he hath a will and reason." Thomas Goodwin, *Exposition of Ephesians 2*, vol 2 of *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021), 93.

[50] Turretin, *IET*, XI.xxi.9. Turretin is explaining James 1:15 in this section of his *Institutes*.

[51] See, Goodwin, Thomas Goodwin, *An Unregenerate Man's Guiltiness before God*, 59.

[52] On the ordering of goodness in the life of upright man, see Goodwin, *An Unregenerate Man's Guiltiness before God*, 287.

gument and yet fundamentally misunderstand. According to SC, Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane serves as an example of how to steward desires that are "contrary" to God (23). The divine and human will are purportedly at odds (23).[53] Is this because Jesus desires good or bad things (23)? Although his instincts do not align with the Father, he disciplines himself to respond rightly. SC contend that this is the path forward for Christians who have SSA temptations.

If we apply the concepts discussed throughout this article, we may gain a clearer understanding of Christ's temptation. But, before explaining Christ's temptations, consider the account offered by SC up to this point. SC do not carry their logic far enough. Sexual temptation is not sin on their view. Any subset of sexual temptation is also not sin. As I demonstrated above, the logic of this view requires that Jesus could or did have SSA temptations, along with temptations toward children, open sexual relations, trans-attraction, orgies, dog-attraction, and the like. On SC's account, this is at least plausible. Further, they would not consider it problematic. In the midst of all of these temptations, he would still have been a perfect redeemer. Again, the heinous nature of such statements is sufficient for their own refutation. If SC wish to defend these notions, let them take up their pen and carry forth the logic of their position that all may see how they implicate Christ in the conclusions which they draw.

How then should one account for Christ's temptations? Let us consider Satan's temptations in the wilderness along with Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. First, Satan tempts Christ with food. Christ ate bread throughout the Scripture and man lives by bread, just not bread alone (Matt 4:4). The object of the act considered in itself is an acceptable object, materially and formally. Second, Christ was called to display divine power and prerogative in a near-death experience. Christ would do just that later in his ministry, but not as a mere display of power unto a vain end. Rather, he would suffer death on the cross, be buried, and rise again on the third day as a marvelous display of divine power sweetly joined to wisdom. His angels were present in his suffering, resurrection, and ascension.[54] Third, Satan offered him the kingdoms of the world through ungodly means. Christ acquired these same kingdoms of the world through godly means. Jesus rejected the bread that was useful to sustain his life though he ate of it in other instances. He refused to perform vain feats of power that are mere pleasantries to the eye though he would manifest his power and wisdom in the resurrection. Though he rejected the means of Satan, Christ still received all authority on heaven and earth as his proportionate and perfect reward. In the first temptation, the circumstance made the object, eating the bread, wrong. In the second temptation, a good object would have been corrupted by a bad remote end. In the third temptation, the object was a bad means and could not justify the end.

Not a single temptation here resembles SSA. The object of bread is an appropriate object of desire in itself while the object of SSA is always a forbidden object. The act of demonstrating divine power is good insofar as it has the appropriate end and reveals wisdom. SSA acts never have an appropriate end because the act is disor-

[53] The Christological commitments of SC are unclear. I will operate from a classic Chalcedonian Christology since it is correct, orthodox, and does not undermine the arguments listed by SC. One oddity in their piece was the regular mention of "fully" God and "fully" man. This quantitative method of reasoning about natures serves as one more instance of unstated, unwarranted, or unargued philosophical assumptions. Maybe this is why they refer to the Trinity and the Incarnation as paradoxes (10). It could simply be that SC are unaware of that which they speak.

[54] I am grateful for conversations with Daniel Scheiderer where he reminded me that Christ not only displayed wisdom and power but was ministered to by angels.

dered by nature.[55] The kingdoms of the world were eventually received as part of the joy set before Christ but, as SC rightfully contends, lust and same-sex relations can never be enjoyed. All of this is natural to Christ's humanity and office as Mediator. SSA temptations are always and only unnatural by virtue of the object. No circumstances or ends can make SSA good. Up to this point, Christ's temptations have not helped SC's case. But let us now consider Gethsemane.

Contrary to SC's contention, the account in the Garden does not reveal contrary or contradictory wills. A contrary will wills the opposite. For example, God willed that the Son go to the cross but the Son, according to his humanity, willed not to go to the cross. But neither the text nor sound theological reasoning reveal that the Son, according to his humanity, willed contrary to the Father.[56] A contradictory will wills something other than what has been willed. For example, God willed that the Son go to the cross but the Son willed to die by stoning instead. Yet, this is not what occurs in Christ's prayer.

What does occur? The Son asks if it is possible for the cup to pass from him. The cup, taken simply and in itself, is pain that should be avoided. Drinking it involves bearing the wrath of God and suffering as an innocent one at the hands of sinful man in a manner that renders them murderers. No human can rightly desire these things in themselves. Asking if it is possible to avoid the bitterness of the cup accords with human nature and, consequently, with the will of God. The matter of the object is unpleasant and destructive to human life, which the Son enjoyed and was required to preserve.[57] It is equivalent to asking if it is possible to avoid a painful medical procedure but accepting it insofar as one is assured that it is ordered toward health. Or, it is like a husband running into a burning building to save his bride, knowing that he will likely die. The husband seeks to avoid the death of all parties involved but is willing to die if it means his bride can live.

Christ asks if it is possible for the matter of the object to be avoided. He recognizes the pain about to be brought upon his body and soul. His petition reveals his true humanity and demonstrates that he has an irascible appetite and human will. The Son wills to preserve his life and honor his Father. He seeks to avoid the bitterness of the cup, an unjust death at the hands of his fellow men under the authority of Pontius Pilate and suffering the wrath of God. The evils the Son wishes to avoid cannot be willed in themselves in a holy manner. The goods the Son must will must be pursued but cannot be maintained if he is to follow his Father's will, just as one undergoes a painful medical procedure or runs into a burning building. Therefore, the Son must forego certain goods to be pursued and receive the cup insofar as it is ordered to the greater good of divine justice (proximate end) and

[55] If the remote end is love or intimacy, this is not a bad end considered in itself. However, given the object of the act, the end is mired in its pursuit of an illicit object (Rom 3:8).

[56] Since there is one divine will, one cannot ask if the Son could will contrary to the Father according to his divinity. Divine simplicity renders the question nonsensical. The questions here assume a human will since will most properly belongs to natures and the Son is acting according to his humanity in this text. The arguments here assume the orthodox commitment of dyothelitism. This assumption is warranted since the text in question has been historically used to argue for two wills in Christ, one divine and the other human. For a helpful treatment of these issues and an argument for volitional-non-contrariety, see Randall K. Johnson, *The Christological Case for Compatibilism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2026).

[57] Contra SC, when they write, "The mere fact that his instinctive desire differs from his Father's desire for him is not itself a sin" (23). The square of opposition as taught in classic logic texts would be of great use here as one seeks to understand the difference between contrariety and contradiction. One can also read William Perkins, who writes of the "combat of diverse desires," saying, "upon sundry respects drawing man to and fro. This may be in man's nature without fault, and was in Christ in whom the desire of doing His Father's will, striving and struggling with another desire whereby nature seeks to preserve itself, caused Him to pray in this manner." William Perkins, "Exposition of the Creed," in *The Works of William Perkins*, vol 5, ed. Ryan Hurd (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 148.

brings many sons to glory (remote end) so that God may be glorified (ultimate end).58 He willingly submits. The cup is material able to receive the form of public propitiation (Rom 3:25). The Son drinks it to the dregs, but not because it is a good cup in itself. The bitter cup is ordered to a good end, and the Son receives his beautiful bride for drinking it. He also possesses the very thing he had a right to and sought to preserve in Gethsemane, blessed life.

Again, this temptation does not support the notion that SSA temptations are without sin. Christ's request is a request to preserve and protect his nature, which is a good petition in itself rightly ordered under the will of God as revealed in human nature. SSA temptations are contrary to and harm human nature. Christ giving himself up as a sacrifice for sinners is not unnatural even if it is higher than nature. SSA temptations are neither natural nor higher than nature, but unnatural and deformed, destroying human nature. Christ's will is not contrary or contradictory to his Father's will whereas SSA contradicts man's natural *telos*.[59]

SC's Christological case, like other parts of their paper, only makes sense if one pays no attention to the details behind the curtain. Not only are their anthropology and theory of action underdeveloped, so too are their Christological arguments. They fail to draw out the implications of their views and do not sufficiently demonstrate that Christ's temptations support the claim that SSA temptations are not sinful.

FAILS TO ACCOUNT FOR THE ROLE OF THE MEAN IN MORAL REASONING

Before moving on to pastoral reflections, one final word should be said about what makes an act right or wrong. SC contend that good objects can lead to bad desires, but they do not specify how. Using food as an example, they write,

> A desire for something fundamentally good, like food, can become distorted into a sinful desire when it isn't disciplined within the boundaries set by God. The shift from involuntary hunger to voluntary gluttony doesn't happen because good food has turned into evil food. It happens because we've stopped responding to our appetite in a God-honoring way (23).

But food, unlike SSA temptations, is a fitting object for the human stomach. As mentioned earlier, it can become a sin on account of immoderation in excess or deficiency, but not on account of the object. SSA temptations are not problematic because of excess or deficiency. The problem is that the appetite is ordered to the wrong object. Food is the proper object of the concupiscible appetite.[60] Thus, their analogy does not support their position but only further demonstrates what is lacking in their process of reasoning.

Good objects can be good objects even when wrongfully desired; the nature of the object remains good by virtue of its matter, form, and proximate end. Good objects can be corrupted by bad circumstances or remote ends (the end of agent). A comparable analogy to SSA temptations is ceramic ashtray attraction.[61] If a man desires to eat ashtrays, his desires are sinful because ashtrays are not an object of food. They destroy mouth, throat, and stomach.

[58] Because the Son wills a greater good, his willing of lesser goods need not be understood as contrariety or contradiction.
[59] Perkins distinguishes between three combats, two of which are sinful. There is the struggle between reason and appetite and between flesh and spirit. Christ did not engage in these combats. Rather, he engaged in the combat of diverse desires. Perkins, "Exposition of the Creed," 148.
[60] Here, I use the term philosophically rather than theologically.
[61] Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 124.

PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

Theology matters. What you think affects how you live. Since the account offered here presents a different way of thinking about SSA, it is appropriate to offer different pastoral counsel.

For those who struggle with SSA temptations

You are not a beast driven by instinct and untouched by grace. SC's account shamefully depicts you like Nebuchadnezzar whereas this account affirms that you are a human made in the image of God. You are a new creation in Christ Jesus. The old things isolated to your past, the old things present with you today, and the old sins from Adam that remain in the world and our flesh do not reign in your life. Christ reigns in you. God has made you new. The work of God's grace goes beyond the tips of your fingers; it touches your very soul. It reaches behind all SSA desires and enables you to mortify them by the Spirit of God (Rom 8:13). Your SSA desires aren't beyond the touch of God's grace or out of reach of your own reason.

For these reasons, you should repent of disordered SSA temptations. The matter you desire (a person of the same sex) is not fit to receive the sexual act from you. Adam did not have SSA temptations in his state of innocence. Christ, the impeccable God-man, did not either. On the contrary, Christ came to save us from this sin. His grace enables you to employ your reason to direct your will away from improper objects and rightly order yourself to proper goods while cultivating good and godly desires.

As a consequence, you should never identify yourself as a SSA Christian. The presence of sin in your life is general, not particular. Sin remains as an internal principle of your flesh that must constantly be mortified. When your will consents, it becomes particularized in what is known as actual sin.[62] To attach a qualitative deformity in the form of a particular sin to your self concept is unbecoming of the name you bear in Christ.[63] He has set you free from the dominion of sin in your life such that sin does not reign in your mortal body. If you name the sin, you explicitly acknowl-

[62] The will's role may be explicit consent or a negative nolition or not refusing.

[63] SC are known to speak of the role of adjectives and their relationship to identity. They often use the language of "American Christian" to show that certain identities can compete with their Christian identify (Sean McDowell, "Full DIALOGUE: LGBTQ Issues Dividing the Church – Preston Sprinkle," YouTube video, posted January 2025, 47:03, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGuxjNtHW5A&t=2823s; Greg Coles, "What Does 'Gay Christian' Actually Mean? Greg Coles, Part 2," Theology in the Raw, YouTube video, accessed August 10, 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xD2qH3-3eag). While this is true, they are confused in several respects.

First, Gregory Coles will speak about how adjectives sometimes do or do not transform substances. He uses the example of yellow cheese and toe cheese. While he seems to be playful, it is helpful to point out that adjectives are accidents that inhere in but do not "fundamentally alter" the nature of substances, as Coles seems to suggest. Yellow cheese and toe cheese are not the same substance. One is called cheese equivocally. I didn't think this needed to be said but Coles has used this analogy for years (James White and Gregory Coles, "Road Trip: Debate – Is 'Gay Christian' a Biblically Acceptable Identity for Members of Christ's Church?," Mid-Atlantic Reformation Society, The Future of Christendom 2023: The Gospel at War, Spooky Nook Sports, Manheim, PA, September 16, 2023, YouTube video, posted by Future of Christendom, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZqD2Yp2Ons). Second, some cheeses that are spoken about are species of cheeses as indicated by their color, which is an accident known as a quality. It would be helpful if SC articulated whether Gay Christian is a species of Christian. Third, "American Christian" can merely pick out the place wherein someone resides. This is another accident that modifies the substance in question as it concerns its place. Fourth, "American" can compete with "Christian" insofar as one speaks of allegiance to the two cities in which they dwell. However, patriotism is an integral part of the virtue of justice. While one can disorder their patriotism, placing love of people and place over love of God, the problem does not reside in the virtue itself, but the disordered love. SSA, as I have argued in this article, always takes an improper object. The problem is not ordering loves but whether someone is materially suited to receive love in a sexual form. If one describes himself as an "American Christian" to highlight his desire to fulfill his debt of love to his country (Rom 13:8), then one has also emphasized a quality that is virtuous as manifested in love of neighbor. The kind of confusion that comes from SC can be explained by the fact that they have intentionally avoided classic philosophical and theological language in favor of jargon that has either imbibed contemporary philosophical commitments or is simply whimsical. The same is true of terms such as Side A, B, X, and Y. They are incapable of carrying the necessary weight for meaningful discourse. It is as if intentional obfuscation is the goal. Running in circles that employ these terms cheapens ethical discourse, allowing you to speak of yellow cheese and toe cheese as if an actual point is being made.

"Sexual desire is a good given by God in our nature that ought to be pursued in the right way, at the right time, with the right person, and for the right ends."

edge that particular forms of sin reigns in you. Christ, your King, reigns in you. Day-by-day he enables you to mortify particular sins and weaken your sinful desires.

For those with heterosexual desires

Order your sexual desires properly. For those looking to marry, sexual desire ordered toward the right object — a person fit for marriage — is a good thing. Sexual desire is a good given by God in our nature that ought to be pursued in the right way, at the right time, with the right person, and for the right ends. As a male, you are ordered toward the female sex. As a female, you are ordered toward the male sex. One is ordered by nature to the opposite sex. This should not be conceived as a subjective desire to have sexual relations with any and all members of the opposite sex but a recognition of the fundamental and natural orientation of humans by virtue of embodied existence.

The sexual appetite supplied by God is a good gift because it properly inclines you to a sexual union wherein intimacy and the propagation of the species occur. It is given to you in your human nature as a good that drives you to order your life, find a spouse, get married, and have children. As the appetite for food is good, so too is the appetite for sex. Both can and ought to be rightly ordered. Likewise, both appetites can and ought not to be abused.

SC characterize some as arguing that any sexual desire outside of marriage is sin (5). Whether their characterization is accurate, I will leave others to decide. Regardless, I think this is a faulty position. The marriage union is by nature a sexual union, a good to be desired (Gen 2:18). This union is a one-flesh union consummated in the conjugal act. Throughout marriage, husbands and wives owe a debt of sexual love to each other (1 Cor 7:3-4). God willing, children follow. To desire marriage simply is to desire a sexual union in covenant. One cannot tear asunder the covenant from the sexual union nor the sexual union from the covenant. Marriage is not a mere covenant wherein sexual relations can rightly occur. Rather, it is a covenant that rightly orders sexual relations for the propagation of the human race, the preventing of wandering lusts, and mutual companionship grounded in the one flesh union. Because these two have joined themselves together in covenant by the sexual union, they are joined until death.[64]

Prior to marriage, this natural orientation toward the opposite sex becomes more concrete as one discovers the particular person with whom they wish to enter into an intrinsically sexual union.[65] Since this

[64] Death terminates the covenant. This affirmation does not exclude acts that may break the bond of the marriage union, such as adultery and abandonment. See John Owen, "Of Marrying After Divorce In Case of Adultery," in *The Works of John Owen*, vol 16, ed. William H. Goold (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 256.

[65] Technically speaking, this would be the matter of the object of the act. Although I think this is the correct way to think about

is the nature of the union and that which is first in intention is last in execution, it is a purpose of the mind to have a sexual relationship and create offspring with that particular one by engaging in the procreative act that is essential to the marriage union. However, since what is first in intention (a purpose of the mind to fulfill one's natural inclination with this particular one) is last in execution (the sexual union itself), then bringing illicit thoughts or actions associated with the *telos* into the present becomes sinful. In other words, while ordering our will in the right direction (the conjugal act in the context of marriage), we must yet avoid lust and sexual immorality.

A helpful philosophical category can be employed here. One can conceive of something in the mind without an accompanying image. One can conceive of necktie without an image of a particular necktie. A concept refers to what a thing is, its essence, whereas an image concerns a particular necktie that has color, length, material, and other associated features. When one chooses to enter into an intrinsically sexual union with another through marriage, they are intending to have a sexual relation with that one by virtue of the nature of that particular union. This conception in the mind differs from an image.[66] One can conceive of entering into a sexual union with a particular one without imagining what it would be like to be in sexual union with the same one.

If you do not desire to enter into a sexual union, then do not pursue marriage. If entering into a sexual union with that particular one is not a desirable concept, then do not marry that one. If you do desire to enter into a sexual union with that one, do not engage in sexual acts outside of the union or indulge in lust by fantasizing about that person in the present as if they were your spouse.[67] Count them as the one you hope to be your spouse should the Lord will (James 4:13–17).

For those with heterosexual desires in a marriage union, you must still rightly order your sexuality. You can err with your spouse in excess, a form of sexual gluttony. You can err in defect, failing to render each other the debts owed (1 Cor 7:3). With regard to the sensible good — the good which pleases the senses — in the marital union, one ought to be temperate, not immature or insensible. You can also err by taking your body and mind away from the proper object of your sexual union and setting your desires upon another or simply having no desire for the one God has given to you by his providence.

the sexual act, I find it lacking the necessary romance. "Roses are red, and violets are blue. Suitable matter of the conjugal act are you." While true, it lacks the beauty of the Song of Solomon.

[66] It may be helpful to distinguish between image and memory as well as add a further example to differentiate image and concept. If you are told to think of a white horse, you will image a white horse in your mind. If the image of the white horse is not just a mere image, but a particular white horse you encountered once, then it is a memory because the image of the white horse is from your past experience. If you relay this past experience to a friend, you will tell them about the white horse you encountered and they will image a white horse in their mind. The image won't be the same as your memory because that memory properly belongs to you. The concept of the horse differs from the image and memory of a horse. The concept is a universal. As such, it allows you to rightly identify whether any thing in particular is in fact a horse, whether white or brown, Clydesdale or thoroughbred, mare or stallion. The image or memory will always be of a particular horse whereas a concept excludes particularities.

Applying this to the case at hand, one can conceive of entering into a marriage covenant, which is a sexual covenant, without imagining what it would be like to have sexual relations with a particular person. If one has had sexual relations with that particular person (or any other for that matter) outside of the marriage covenant, then recalling images associated with the memory is also wrong. However, one can remember that they had immoral sexual relations with a particular one during confession of sin without imaging in their mind what that particular sin was like. David serves as an example of this in Psalm 51. Similarly, you can conceive of David's sin with Bathsheba without having the memory or imaging what that relation looked like. If one can recall past sin without imaging it in their mind in a way that allows for godly repentance, then surely one can anticipate a God-honoring covenant relation that is essentially sexual with a particular person in a godly manner without imaging in their mind what it would be like to be with that one. Admittedly, difficulties attend both instances. These categories allow us to think rightly about the desire of one to enter a sexual union and affirm that this desire is a God-given good fulfillment of our appetite that should be pursued, though not imaged.

[67] Fantasizing in this way would be immorally employing the imaginative sense.

This is always wrong. Guard your marriage by enjoying a good thing in a good way with the good spouse provided to you by God's kind providence.

This counsel differs significantly from another characterization set forth by SC. They write, "If every unfulfilled sexual appetite presents an opportunity for sexual temptation, and if experiencing sexual temptation is a morally culpable sin, then Christians who have any sexual appetite must pursue marriage and try to have at least as much sex as that appetite directs them" (25). It is quite telling that SC think this is a serious objection, as if those who disagree cannot conceive of an appetite ordered by reason. Even their objections are framed in a manner that treat sexual appetites the way a dog treats food.

How might this objection be answered? The amount of food differs from person to person, as discussed above. The same is true for sex in marriage. One must affirm the goodness of sexual relations with the spouse, engage in these relations, and moderate sensible pleasure in a manner appropriate to the persons and state of the marriage union. Moderating a good appetite differs from having an intrinsically disordered appetite.

For those with the gift of celibacy

The gift of celibacy does not render you asexual. You are still male or female and, as such, by nature you are ordered to the opposite sex. You must also order yourself rightly as one with a particular sex. You may not possess a desire to fulfill a God-given appetite with a member of the opposite sex. This is not the same as SSA temptation, which is an ungodly desire and a sign that you need to rightly order your sexual appetite consistent with God's design. A burning of the sexual appetite for the wrong material need not be taken as a sign of singleness, but a desire that must be reordered.

If you do find yourself with this gift, use it for the good of the kingdom of God. Married couples are to be fruitful and multiply, filling the earth. Those with the gift of celibacy are called to be fruitful as fathers and mothers in the faith.

Celibate men, raise up and cultivate godly doctrine and practice in Christ's church. Celibate women, receive and nurture all



manner of life, physical and spiritual, so that you may nourish and beautify all that God has put within your grasp. The fruitfulness of the celibate life ought to spiritually mimic the physical fruitfulness of the marriage life. "Asexuality" and SSA do not picture fruitfulness, but a turn away from life unto death. Instead, cause life to flourish for the sake of the kingdom of God. This includes promoting, preserving, and protecting the marriage institution as an institution.

For those concerned with unity

Christian unity is a cause of great concern and should be pursued. SC outline the terms of unity by relegating differences of SSA to the level of a lesser debate and matter of Christian freedom (26–28). Meanwhile, they claim that calling for repentance of SSA is pastorally unwise and akin to the error of the Judaizers while, ironically, they align themselves with the Roman Catholic view of concupiscence.[68] The issue of the Judaizers was not a lesser debate, nor was the Reformation. So, which is it? SC cannot have it both ways.

Instead, we should preach the freeness of the gospel of grace for those who experience SSA. The grace of God forgives actions and attractions that are contrary to our nature. The grace of God is great enough to cover those who do not think the attraction is itself sinful. But unity cannot tolerate antinomianism about personal, pastoral, and theological issues that touch the nature of humanity and fall under the light of nature and light of faith. The halfway house established by SC will not serve as a source of true peace and thus it cannot be a basis for unity.

CONCLUSION

The pastoral paper published by the *Center for Faith and Sexuality* does not offer pastorally correct answers because it is built on a faulty foundation. It leads Christians away from the truth of nature and Scripture and fails to call evil evil (Isa 5:20). Accordingly, it robs humans of their humanity. The sinfulness of sin is not understood. Thus, neither is the need for divine grace for forgiveness and healing. Their anthropology and theory of action is ill-equipped for the task at hand.

Christians will do well to reject this teaching. Those with same-sex attraction will find a better account of the law of God and power of grace should they look elsewhere. There is abundant life to be enjoyed and the blessing of forgiveness for all with sinful desires.[69]

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[68] For a helpful contemporary treatment of concupiscence, see Steven Wedgeworth, "The Heart Wants What It Wants: A Protestant Assessment of the Doctrine of Concupiscence," in *Ruined Sinners to Reclaim: Sin and Depravity in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson, The Doctrines of Grace (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024), 633–667.Wedgeworth helpfully connects the debates over concupiscence to the doctrine of justification, the material principle of the Reformation. SC's view doesn't align with the Roman Catholic view completely though it bears several similarities. Rome condemns SSA among the unbaptized but denies that concupiscence is a sin among the baptized because original sin, its damnable fount, has been washed away in baptism.

[69] Although it is not customary to dedicate articles, it is fitting that I dedicate this piece to the members of Trinity Reformed Baptist Church, past and present. They were faithful to Christ when a previous minister sought to lead the church astray over the topics addressed in this article. He eventually and regrettably made shipwreck of his faith (1 Tim 1:19). Nevertheless, the saints of God stood fast. They did not waiver but removed him from their midst. Years later, I accepted a call to serve as their pastor, and it has been one of the greatest joys of my life. I rejoice in their faithfulness. I praise God for guarding the flock and preserving them from danger. In particular, I wish to express gratitude to Daniel and Rebekah Garrison. They served as pillars of our congregation during that difficult time and remain faithful servants to this day.

ROSARIA BUTTERFIELD

Matthew Vines Says He's Gay, Not Queer. He Thinks This Matters. Should We?



On June 30, 2026, Matthew Vines, author of *God and the Gay Christian* and founder of the gay-advocacy program, The Reformation Project, authored a *New York Times* editorial entitled "I'm Gay, not Queer. It Matters."[1] Throughout the essay, Matthew Vines makes a categorical and moral distinction between gay (which he defines as a fixed and morally neutral sexual orientation) and queer (a rebellion against the idea of moral norms). Because homosexuality, from desire to action, is rebellion against God's law and a flourishing society, God does not approve of the moral distinction that Matthew Vines finds so significant.

Matthew opens his piece with this thesis: "Conservative Christian activists are seeking to undo the reason I was able to marry my husband four years ago in a Baptist church in Texas." The villain in Matthew's fictional account is a "conservative Christian activist" who rains on his (Pride) parade and disavows his sham marriage. But what are conservative Christians really doing? They are seeking to conserve the truth of Scripture and to pass that down through the generations, thus fulfilling the command issued in Jude to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (v. 3). Jude's sharp charge conveys a dire warning: wolves and false teachers, unregenerate charlatans, "have crept in … ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness" (v. 4). Lewdness means indecent sexual conduct or expression, and a biblical example of lewdness is homosexuality. Biblically speaking, conservative Christians know Scripture and know a wolf when he is writing a *New York Times* editorial. Christians reject so-called "gay marriages" and other attempts to twist God's law not because we "undo the reason [Matthew] was able to marry his [pretend] husband" but because we love our neighbors with the truth. Christians want all sinners to come to Christ, and so far as it depends on us we will not put a stumbling block between a human being made in God's image and the God who made him. God creates, redeems, saves, and judges.

NO DAYLIGHT BETWEEN "GAY" AND "QUEER" ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE

Matthew continues his argument by claiming that "Being gay is not a choice." Accordingly, he rejects the logic of "those who argue that same-sex orientation is better thought of as a part of a wider rebellion against social norms." On this point Matthew makes two distinct claims. The first is that homosexuality is unchosen and therefore sinless. The second is that even though the Bible calls homosexuality a sin, Matthew calls it "same-sex orientation," which he believes is a morally neutral set of feelings and desires that are permanent and fixed. What's the difference between sin and sexual orientation? Bluntly, it's the difference between a biblical anthropology and a modern man-made one. To demonstrate this, let's compare Matthew Vines to the Bible.

When sin entered the world, and the hearts of all men fell in Adam, Jesus Christ offered rescue. By faith, Christians receive Christ's rescue. Christians repent and believe, forsake their sin, and grow in Christ, experiencing what Thomas Chalmers calls "the expulsive power of a new affection." In Christ, a regenerated man or woman becomes a new creation: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old have passed away, behold, all things have become new" (2 Cor 5:17). When a Christian sins, he doesn't defend his right to his sin based on the strength of his lust or his good intentions for that lust. He learns to hate his sins, repent of and forsake them, and live in the integrity

1 Matthew Vines, "I'm Gay, Not Queer. It Matters," *New York Times*, June 30, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/06/30/opinion/queer-gay-right,s.html.

"The Bible tells us that a regenerated, born-again Christian has the power of the Holy Spirit to mortify his sin, including the sin of homosexuality."

of his new birth in Christ. A born-again Christian is forgiven through Christ's blood and liberated from the bondage of sinful habits, deeds, and desires through his resurrection. Sin must be mortified, and we do that through the power that Christ gives us through his death and resurrection. All Christians are enlisted in a war against sin, including the internal, unbidden indwelling sin that we inherit from Adam. Until we are glorified, we are enlisted in a war between the flesh and the indwelling Holy Spirit: "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish" (Gal 5:17). Sin may tempt and trick us, but Christians call sin a sin, and reject false teachers and Bible twisters, who, like Matthew, call sin a morally neutral orientation.

The Bible tells us that a regenerated, born-again Christian has the power of the Holy Spirit to mortify his sin, including the sin of homosexuality. Instead of blaming God for his sin nature, he takes Christian ownership over his sin, and, through the process of repentance and belief, kills it. When sin lingers, he says, like Paul, "For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do" (Rom 7:15). The true follower of Christ remembers that the fight against sin is part of our sanctification and because the tomb is empty and we love our Lord, we "present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is [our] reasonable service" (Rom 12:1).

God's word, then, tells Matthew Vines that fighting against his unholy sexual desires — including the indwelling sin that no one chooses — is his reasonable service. But because Vines is a Bible-twister, he writes: "Being gay is neither chosen nor changeable, and gay people deserve the same legal protections and chance at happiness as everyone else." But God says unrepentant ~~sin~~ (including homosexuality) sends you to hell: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites…will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you" (1 Cor 6:9-11). At this point we should not be surprised: God's word says the exact opposite of Matthew Vines'.

SIX PESKY VERSES

Matthew declares he "came out" in 2010 after a "painstaking study of Scripture." One immediately wonders what kind of "painstaking study" he underwent? He explains: "All six of the Bible's references to same-sex relations are negative… but differ fundamentally from same-sex marriages today." On what planet does

working through six verses merit the descriptive adjective "painstaking"?

Matthew says there are six pesky verses — albeit condemning, but don't dwell on the obvious — and he claims these six and only these six verses deny God's blessing over the unnatural lust of homosexuality. But the Bible contains 31,086 verses, and every single one is pure and worthy of our study. The Bible is a unified biblical revelation. You cannot remove six verses (or one) to concoct a theological conclusion. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* has taught a biblical hermeneutic to Christians for hundreds of years. It tells us that the meaning of Scripture "is not manifold, but one," meaning that the Bible speaks with consistency and clarity, and its meaning does not contradict itself or change over time (WCF 1:9). Jesus is the Logos, the Word made flesh, after all. Furthermore, the Word of God holds authority over all Scripture, "for which it ought to be believed and obeyed" (WCF 1:4). Using personal lust to dismiss as irrelevant six Bible verses reflects many things, but a "painstaking study of Scripture" is not one of them.



MARTIAN DESERT "MARRIAGES"

Matthew also says "Same-sex love" [is]... as profound and enduring as heterosexual love" [and]... in keeping with a core biblical idea about marriage: that it is a covenant designed to reflect God's self-giving love for humanity through a sacrificial love of spouses for each other." But according to the Bible, a core Biblical idea about marriage depends on one man and one woman, reflecting the covenant of Christ and his Bride, the Church. Biblical marriage reflects Christ the husband to his bride, the church. Biblical marriage is a sanctified union that gives life and preserves society. Biblical sexuality is fruitful. Homosexual sex is as barren as a Martian desert. The only fruit it bears is sexually transmitted diseases and destruction through a blatant misuse of the body. God made male and female in a distinct pattern for a creational purpose: men are to lead, provide, and protect, while women are to respect and submit to godly leadership, keep the home, and nurture. Yes, I know them's fighting words, but I'll stick with that since it's plainly revealed in Genesis 1–2 and the rest of Scripture.

Furthermore, heterosexual desire and homosexual desire do not achieve moral equivalency because personal feelings do not stand in judgment over God's Word. Because unrepented homosexual desire takes you no place but hell, it

must be mortified. And in its place, new affections that comport with God's Word must be prayed for, sparked, quickened, vivified, and established. Heterosexual desire must also be under the authority of biblical boundaries: sexual purity is achieved in biblical marriage or chaste singleness. But only heterosexual desire reflects the pattern and purpose God established when he made us male and female in his image. Can someone sin heterosexually? Yes, but here's the difference: heterosexual sin is a sin against purpose (i.e., fornication, adultery, pornography), while homosexual sin is a sin against pattern (male and female in the covenant of marriage) *and* purpose.

REJECTING THE LOGIC OF THE GAY-QUEER DISTINCTION

Matthew says it matters that he's gay, not queer. By this he means that his homosexuality is normal and blessed by God, but his neighbor's queer identity is rebellious and condemned. Christians reject his deceptive argument. Like all unregenerate thinkers, Matthew is both deceived and deceiver. If you believe him, you need to accept the lie that says there is such a thing as a gay man. There is no such ontological thing as a gay man. Homosexuality is not part of the created order. Like it or not, Matthew is a man, made in the Image of God, for the purpose of sexual purity, chastity in singleness or fruitfulness in godly marriage, filling the earth and stewarding it (Gen 1:26–28). The particular kind of man that Matthew represents is not a gay one, but a coward, someone who shirks his duties to repent and believe and dodges his responsibility to protect and provide for a woman in a real marriage.

So while Matthew Vines says he's gay but not queer, Christians cannot accept his logic. The fact that Matthew doesn't march his "boyfriend" on all fours down the streets of Manhattan at the Gay Pride festival on a tactical leather agitation collar and doesn't take estrogen and wear girls' panties does not make his sin against God any less hell-bound than those who do. When Matthew Vines says he's gay, not queer, it means that he knows what a man *is*. But because he rejects what a man is *for*, this means he's still as queer as a three-eyed fish.

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JONATHAN LEEMAN



The Nature of A Husband's Authority



Too often, Christians discuss authority as if it's one kind of thing. We hear the word "authority" and immediately picture a one-dimensional hierarchy, higher and lower, with the one on top giving orders and the one on the bottom following.[1] Then we take whatever picture of authority we have in our heads and lay it over marriage and the home, as when fathers characterize themselves as kings of their own little castles. Others, wanting nothing to do with that, conclude a husband possesses no real authority at all.

We should be leery of mapping different offices on top of one another too precisely. Instead, we need to pay close attention to both what the Bible says and what it refrains from saying. This process requires that we observe which words are used.

1 This essay is taken from *Using Authority Well: A Concise Guide for Men by Jonathan Leeman*, Copyright © 2026, chapter 3. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, www.crossway.org.

Imagine sitting down with Jesus on judgment day to review your job performance as a husband. Opening up the Bible, he doesn't point with his finger to passages that say, "Rule her," or "Command your wife," and ask, "Did you do this?" Such passages are not in the Bible.

Instead, he runs his finger down to the texts that tell you to "love" her, not to be "harsh" with her (Col 3:19), to live with her in an "understanding way" and show her "honor" (1 Pet 3:7). Then he asks, "Did you do all these?"

Authority comes in a variety of fabrics with a variety of textures that serve a variety of purposes. So if we're going to understand a husband's authority, and a wife's corresponding submission, we need to be more textured in our descriptions of it.

TWO KINDS OF AUTHORITY: COMMAND AND COUNSEL

The Bible presents two kinds of authority, one with the power of enforced discipline and one without. The former we can call the authority of command; the latter, the authority of counsel.

Both should be counted as true authority because God has given their holders the moral right to issue directives that bind the conscience — to say, "You must." The difference is that someone with an authority of command also has the right to enforce what's commanded through discipline. Parents can require a child's obedience and enforce it. The Bible's word for that is the rod. The state can require obedience and enforce it. The word for that? The sword. The congregation can remove someone from membership. Its word — the keys.

Both husbands and elders, however, possess an authority of counsel. The Bible calls wives to "submit" to their husbands as the church submits to Christ (Eph 5:22, 24). A wife should therefore treat her husband's instruction as conscience binding. Yet does the Bible give the husband any mechanism for disciplining his wife? Scan your mind's eye through the entire Bible. The answer is no. Not even remotely. There's no "rod" or "sword" or "keys." A husband has no right to raise a hand, raise a voice, issue threats, or force his wife to do something against her will.

Is that really authority, then? Yes, because the wife, like the church member, is morally bound to submit. And an enforcement mechanism does exist. But the husband just doesn't hold it. Jesus does.

Notice that Scripture most closely matches a husband's authority with Jesus' use of authority at his first coming (Eph 5:25). During his earthly life, Jesus commanded people to follow him, but he didn't exercise the sword. He invited and directed: "Drop your nets and follow me" and "Take up your mat and walk." There's no doubt he was the leader. But he never forced his disciples or anyone to do anything. Your job, husband, is to steward your leadership similar to Jesus in his first coming, and not like Jesus at his second coming when he will come with a sword.

HOW TO EXERCISE AN AUTHORITY OF COUNSEL

A governor and a husband can both say, "You must," and those words morally bind. But woe to the husband who stops there, giving no more thought to his office than that! The absence of an enforcement mechanism dramatically changes the manner in which his authority should be exercised. Like Christ in his first coming, his authority is evangelistic. It invites. It's hope- and life-giving. It's kind and compassionate. It doesn't lord it over; it comes not to be served but to serve. To be more specific, we can say that an authority of counsel . . .

(1) exercises a lighter hand. Suppose you're standing at a fork in the road with your wife. You want to go one way, she the

other. And you're wondering what's a legitimate posture for you, moving from invitation to encouragement, to persuasion, to urging, to insistence, to requirement, to force. I could spend hours qualifying this, but, basically, a husband should lean toward the lighter side of that spectrum. He should never make it all the way to "force," and he should use something like insistence or requirement very, very sparingly. After all, see the point about oneness below.

(2) operates through trust and relationship. An authority of command impels compliance at least in part by the threat of discipline. An authority of counsel impels it by earning trust. Trust is the currency a husband has to spend, the gas that makes the car move. A wife will more gladly follow a man whose integrity and self-sacrificing love she trusts.

(3) is earned. The Bible obligates the wife to submit regardless, since she submits finally not to the man but to the office giver, God. Still, a good husband will work to remove every stumbling block and make following him as easy as possible. He does this by working hard, sacrificing himself, living with integrity, and leading with confidence. Not only that, he woos. Have you ever thought about the connection between Song of Solomon and your headship? Compare two husbands: the man who romances and woos his wife and the man who doesn't. Which of the two do you think will find leading her easier? Seriously, do a word count on Song of Solomon and then compare that to a word count on headship texts. What does that tell you?

(4) is patient and plays the long game. A policeman commands you to slow down now. A parent commands a child to go to bed now. The discipline mechanism, by definition, means it works by limited doses of fear. Taking away the enforcement mechanism means God is not asking you to leverage fear. In fact, you're doing it wrong if you are. Instead, a husband's form of authority requires him to be patient, long-suffering, tender, and consistent. It works for growth over the long run, not forced decisions in the short run. Who wants a wife to follow only because she's required? If you're to lead like Jesus, you want her to want to follow you, and you lead like that.

(5) respects his wife as an equal. A husband must honor his wife as a possessor of equal agency in every decision. Like Paul with Philemon, he appeals not "by compulsion but of your own accord" (Philem 14). His authority calls for collaboration and consent. The one exception: when a couple is at loggerheads over an important decision and someone must make the final call, Scripture teaches that it should be the husband who bears ultimate responsibility before the Lord. That said, the authority of counsel…

(6) is quick to forsake rights. Possessing a right does not imply an obligation to exercise it (e.g. 1 Cor 9:15,18). The Lord may command spouses to give, but that doesn't license husbands to take. Christ came not to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45). So when you find yourself at loggerheads, more often than not, slow down and wait. Pray. Encourage. Listen again. Your goal is not to get your way. It's to lead your family in a godly direction, getting there together and by happy consent.

THE HUSBAND'S JOB: ONENESS

What, then, is the husband's authority for? The marital partnership serves the purposes of dominion (Gen 1:26–28). Yet marriage also serves a previous and higher purpose: oneness. "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," Adam exclaims (Gen 2:23). The husband takes the lead in their shared work — let's farm *this* field — but central to his authority is creating oneness with his wife in it.

And this oneness is not two pieces of gray

clay merged into a bigger ball. It is the oneness of a head and a body. Every husband is his wife's head. He doesn't need to make himself the head. He already is. The only matter up for grabs is what kind of head he'll be: life-giving or life-stealing, present or absent. An abusive head can crush a woman's spirit, and abuse of authority is a particularly heinous sin because of how it destroys a person and lies about God. Yet few things on this earth can strengthen, embolden, and build up a woman like a head who is devoted to her good.

A husband doesn't need to work hard at asserting what he already possesses. And few things reveal weakness and desperation like a husband who raises his voice.

THE PURPOSE AND LIMITS OF HIS AUTHORITY

The highest purpose of a husband's authority is to teach a theology lesson about Christ and the church (Eph 5:25–27). There's something pastoral in his role. He should continually point his wife to the word and the gospel, not to insist on his own desires but to point toward Christ's. When Jesus shows up, she should more easily recognize him because she's been watching her husband imitate him for years.

A wife is commanded to submit "in everything" (Eph 5:24). Yet that authority should rest very lightly on her. She should feel its weight from her engaging with the Lord more than from her husband. And the easiest way to summarize its limit is the word sin. He cannot ask her to sin, nor should he sin against her, whether in what he does or leaves undone.

Several nights before my wedding, my pastor looked at me and said soberly, "Jonathan, you will be God's number one picture of his authority in her life. Never use your authority to harm her, but to be only a blessing."

That's your job, brother: to bless, strengthen, and cause your wife to flourish. Just think: what's the effect of Christ's work in your life?

So ask yourself, is your wife stronger, more confident, more holy, and more lovely than on the day you married her? Has that been the fruit of your leadership? You lead by being the first to die to your own desires, not so that your wife's desires might lead, but so that God's would. ><

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DOUG RICHEY

Reviving the American Family



A PASTORAL AND POLITICAL COLLISION[1]

In 2019, newly sworn into the Missouri House of Representatives while still pastoring full-time, I received a call from a woman in desperate need. She knew that I was both a pastor and a legislator. She wanted insight from both spheres. Years earlier her husband divorced her for another woman, rendering her destitute. She had been a full-time nurse in a stable household until a car accident produced a partial disability that ended her medical practice. Subsequent to her injuries, she and her husband struggled financially but were managing well enough, then he left. Alone and unable to work, she was left to state subsistence and watched her teenage children spiral into self-destructive behaviors. The damage continued into the lives of her young grandchildren.

The perceived lack of adequate state programs frustrated her. Safety-net support lacked a tight enough weave, leaving her with unfulfilled needs. Wearing both pastoral and legislative hats, I asked a question related to the cause of her situation: if her husband had not left, would the circumstances, now consuming her, even exist? She had never thought of it that way. She shifted blame from the state to her unfaithful husband. The reason is obvious. Had he kept the covenant made before God, his bride, and the wedding assembly — had he loved, protected, and provided as God

1 This essay has been adapted from a message given at a First Baptist Church O'Fallon on March 15, 2026 as part of Reviving America (www.revivingamericaevents.com).

calls every husband and father to do — she would not be destitute, nor would her children and grandchildren have required state assistance. At that moment pastoral and legislative work collided.

The conversation that ensued was an exercise in public theology. Public theology applies God's truth within the public arena, properly reflecting God's order for the good of human society. What is humanity? How are human beings to be valued? What's the best context for them to flourish? These and many more questions have faced generations throughout millenia. Our understanding of God's Word compels us to recognize the family as central to a healthy society. There's no flourishing society without flourishing families, no such families without flourishing parents, and no such parents without flourishing spouses in flourishing marriages. It's therefore no surprise that the enemy of God assails marriage, parenthood, and children. If marriage can be discredited and parenthood disparaged, leaving the state as the apparent better parent, God's order suffers distortion.

The government will never weave a safety net tight enough to catch every need produced by broken humanity; that's not its responsibility. Yet our secularized neighbors now assume that every problem demands a governmental response. Having dismissed God, the most powerful remaining entity to resolve human needs is the state, which the secularist embraces.

Three claims follow. First, the family needs revival and protection. Second, the family needs truth. Third, the family needs you. Scripture places such concerns within Christian prayer and public responsibility. Paul urges supplications "for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" (1 Tim 2:1–2). Such prayer is not limited to pursuing protections for personal adherence to the Christian faith. It desires that God-or-



dained governing authority honors his order, righteousness, and justice. Family, with marriage and the children who issue from it, was the first institution God created and remains the fundamental building block of society. The government does not create marriage, children, or the family. Its duty is to protect them, to guard the conditions in which families thrive, and to refrain from managing their internal affairs. To lead peaceful and quiet lives, involves thriving marriages, parenthood, and families.

I. THE FAMILY IS IN NEED OF REVIVAL AND PROTECTION

We need to revive the American family. The evidence of this need surrounds us. Only twenty-five percent of households now have children; in 1960 the figure was fifty percent. Of households with children, approximately forty percent are headed by a single parent. Missouri is no exception; we have more than forty percent of children coming from such homes. The church rightly supports those who, through no fault of their own, raise children alone. Still, this pattern is inconsistent with God's order and produces real hardship.

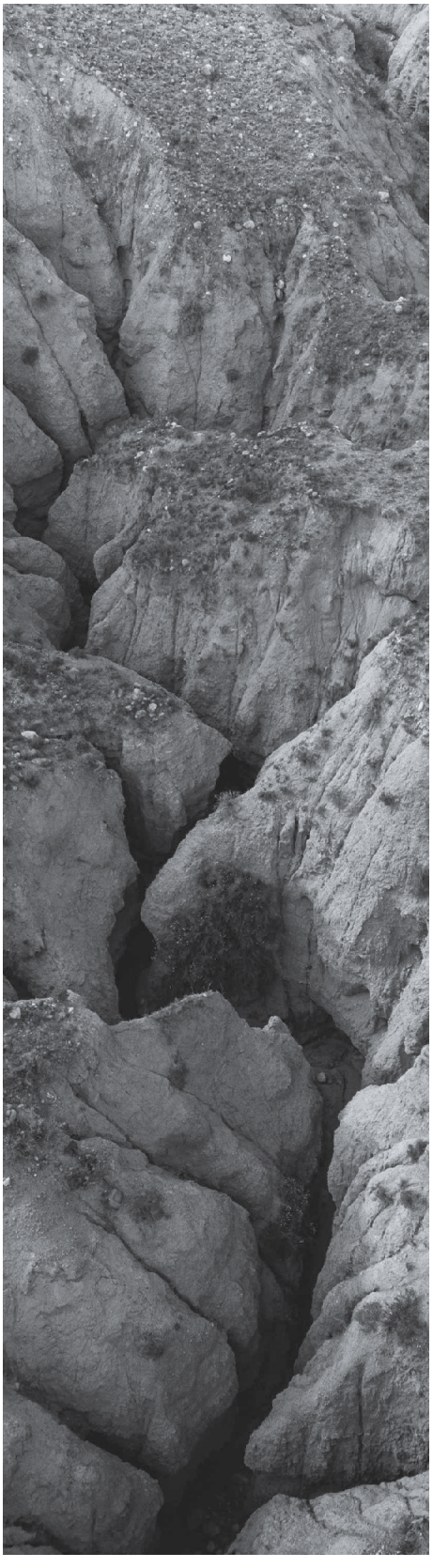
Other problems are observable as well. Recent years show fewer divorces by year five, yet durability remains weak, with nearly a quarter of current divorces occurring after twenty-five years or more. Only twenty-three percent of men are married by age thirty; in the 1970's the comparable figure was eighty percent. Some eighty percent of couples cohabitate, including a striking number of older adults who do so for tax reasons. The share of adults who have never married has risen by forty percent. Contributing factors are debated, but it's clear that marriage and child-bearing aren't trending well. Do we need to revive the family? Yes.

Equally urgent is the need to protect marriage, parenthood, and families. Marriage is devalued. Raising children is put off, if not entirely avoided. The role of parents is discredited. Our culture invests far more energy in sports, recreation, extra-curricular scholarships, and career tracks than in forming husbands, wives, fathers, and mothers. Conversations with sons about self-control, respect for women, work ethic, and readiness for marital responsibility are rare. Daughters are urged toward universities and careers, which may be worthy pursuits, yet often without the reminder that, unless God calls them to singleness, marriage and motherhood are fundamental blessings to be prepared for and desired. Young adults, even within churches, increasingly speak of offspring as an inconvenience to be deferred until career goals are accomplished. That perspective is not biblical.

Institutional bureaucrats compound the problem by discrediting parents. During COVID, I chaired the appropriations committee that oversaw the distribution of pandemic related funds. In one meeting, vendors sought public funds for school software that would track student communications on district-provided devices flagging messages that include self-harm, bullying, mental health concerns, and references to LGBTQ sexuality. The software would then bring these flagged interactions to the attention of a district liaison rather than parents, on the premise that parents might be "a problem." When asked why they presuppose this, the vendors mentioned that school districts required this default. Funding premised on that assumption is misguided and disrespectful to loving parents.

In Parham v. J.R. (1979), the United States Supreme Court held that, "...the statist notion that government should supersede parental authority in all cases because some parents abuse or neglect children is 'repugnant to American tradition.'" Yet too many bureaucrats, counselors, and clinicians have forgotten or simply dismiss American tradition, first principles, natural law, and the Word of God. They assume the default position that parents pose a threat.

This problem is also witnessed when you



"Strong families obstruct it, because parents who catechize children regarding truth, sin, and righteousness will not surrender their child's formation to a centralized Marxist script."

observe the approach hospital systems take with parents. Missouri parents are told by major medical systems that they may not access the digital medical records of their children between the ages of twelve to seventeen, without the child's permission. Nurses ask minors whether a father or mother may remain in the examination room. Such practices treat parents with unearned suspicion. The same assumption is present within the practice of radical gender ideology.

Public schools are known to socially transition students and conceal that fact from parents. Health systems have advised school counselors not to inform parents. Informal "affirming" policies operate even in smaller districts. Parents have been threatened with the loss of custody and

routinely experience emotional blackmail with the claim that refusal to affirm their child's gender identity will produce a dead child rather than a living "trans" child. Detransitioners testify to that coercion.

Public school indoctrination supplies further evidence. Serving as co-chair of Missouri's Joint Education Committee from 2019 to 2024, I oversaw hearings and inquiries into claims that students were being subjected to critical pedagogy and Marxist concepts. The evidence was astonishing. This was concerning for many reasons but the impact upon parents and families was disturbing.

Neo-Marxist collectivism is antithetical to ordered liberty, inalienable rights, and individual responsibility. Strong families obstruct it, because parents who catechize children regarding truth, sin, and righteousness will not surrender their child's formation to a centralized Marxist script. Collectivists therefore oppose the free traditional family.

If the institution God designed for the good of society grows anemic, society will fail with it. Those who undermine Christian teaching and constitutional first principles benefit from our inattention to their strategy. Weak and broken families call for intrusive government intervention. With every call for help, the government, including political subdivisions like school districts, grow more involved. We must protect the family from such attacks.

II. THE FAMILY IS IN NEED OF TRUTH

Secular observers feel the pain of collapsed marriages and endangered children, yet they turn to the only source of help that they know: government grants, programs, and bureaucratic guidelines. Christians know to turn first to God, the ultimate authority over family, marriage, and children. When our life contradicts Scripture, the remedy is repentance and realignment. Yet, faithfulness doesn't exempt anyone from the pains of a fallen world, as the life of Job testifies. But the truth remains that lives ordered by God's truth are more likely to flourish as he intends.

Revival of the American family is God's work, ordinarily accomplished through a people yielded to His Word. If the church doesn't know, love, and live the truth, no one else will. Knowing God's Word leads us to the obvious conclusion that a husband who sacrificially leads, loves, provides for, and, when needed, corrects his wife will likely flourish with his wife. Equally, a husband who imagines he may pursue other women without consequence is a fool and invites tremendous harm.

Though unpopular in the eyes of our hyper-egalitarian society, a revival of family begins with men and a biblical theology of manhood. God created, charged, and confronted the man first (Gen 1–3). Scripture assigns husbands leadership in the church and the home (Eph 5; Col 3; Titus 2; 1 Tim 3; 1 Pet 3) and primary responsibility for the instruction of their children (Deut 6; Ps 78; Prov 4; Eph 6). Women aren't without significance; God made the wife a necessary help. Yet the husband bears chief responsibility for family vitality. The absence of fathers is a principal factor in the present anemia plaguing families. Grace may preserve children in broken homes, but that is not the intended design. Fathers are to protect, provide, teach, and lead, doing so sacrificially for the good of their wives and children. Men and women together must honor marriage and the marriage bed, receive parenthood under God's rule, and offer children a visible pattern of mutual respect, correction, and perseverance. God created marriage and consigned the procreative act within it. He opens and closes the womb, and works generationally through the family.

God's Word marks out three spheres — family, church, and state — each with its responsibility. None may absorb the others. The family is pre-political. Apart from criminal abuse or neglect, parents do not require governmental permission

to raise their children, and government agencies, school districts, and medical clinics are wrong when they claim otherwise. Christians should say so without apology. To do so, however, requires a confidence in God's Truth, the very Truth needed for the revival of the American family.

III. THE FAMILY IS IN NEED OF YOU

The threat to the family is real: influences work to separate parents from children, to weaken parental authority, and to unseat marriage as a covenant between one man and one woman for life. The American family faces a problem that's bigger than any one of us. It's a national problem. It's a state problem. It's a local community problem. It's a problem that sits in the pews of our churches. God, however, is unshaken and calls each of us to engage faithfully for the sake of our neighbors. But how?

First, recognize what's at stake. If the course isn't corrected, crime will continue to rise with increasing family breakdown, taxation will rise with expanding state subsidies, and freedom to govern one's family will shrink as governing authorities make the heartbreaking exceptions the rule, and lives will be destroyed by ideologies that run contrary to creation order. No nation survives the evisceration of the family. And Satan laughs all the while.

Second, take immediate responsibility to be biblically faithful in your home. Most Christians will never sit at tables of decision in state capitols or Washington, D.C., but they do sit in their own living rooms. The example you set before a child, a grandchild, or a spouse is not trivial.

Third, ask God to increase your confidence that his truth produces human flourishing, even among neighbors who do not confess Scripture. If their only change involves embracing their creation order duty to take responsibility for their own children and marriages, they'll enjoy blessings of common grace.

Fourth, pray and labor for the peace of the city. Jeremiah 29:7 reminds us that God's people are to strive for the good of their community and that the welfare of the place where God's people dwell is bound to their own. Communities with stronger marriages and wiser parental care are communities in which the church itself thrives.

Fifth, engage public conversation and public policy for God's glory and your neighbor's good. In a constitutional republic, the government functions according to the consent of the governed. Citizens aren't spectators. Citizens are the authority that delegates legislative authority to a representative body. Neglect of civic stewardship leaves a vacuum where laws that contradict creation order are passed without necessary opposition. Engagement need not be angry, but it must be informed, patient, and convictional. Champion what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, excellent, and worthy of praise, even within politics.

We did not choose this hour, but it's an hour that we must meet with determination and truth-honoring conviction. May God's kind and gracious providence sustain us during this most consequential time.

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JONATHON D. WOODYARD

The Delight of Divine Design:

Complementarianism and Serious Joy

INTRODUCTION: RECOVERING THE JOY OF GOD'S DESIGN

Much of the modern debate surrounding complementarianism is reactive. Over the last several years, Christians have often found themselves answering objections, clarifying misconceptions,[1] and defending biblical authority against the pressures of an egalitarian moment. This moment arises in a Western culture focused on autonomous "expressive individualism" as the means to freedom and happiness.[2]



[1] For example, see Denny Burk, "Mere Complementarianism," *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 1.2 (2019): 28–42; and Denny Burk, "Is Complementarianism a Man-Made Doctrine?," *The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, June 8, 2021, https://cbmw.org/2021/06/08/is-complementarianism-a-man-made-doctrine-2/; and Jonathon Woodyard, "Fake News: Complementarianism and Disinformation," *Christ Over All*, May 10, 2024, https://christoverall.com/article/concise/encore-fake-news-complementarianism-and-disinformation/.

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

Much of the work of complementarians, then, has been defensive.

Of course, defense is often necessary. When error arises, Christians counter with the truth of God's Word. Yet, if all complementarians do is react to error, we run the risk of unintentionally reducing complementarianism to a list of prohibitions: who may preach, who may lead, who may exercise authority.

But complementarianism is not mainly about what one cannot do. Instead, it is a positive vision of God's good design for men and women. Indeed, what if joy is found in embracing God's design for humanity instead of stiff-arming it? What if complementarianism is part of God's original ordering of reality and is structured in such a way to satisfy our longings for true freedom, flourishing, and serious joy?[3] Might we serve the world better if we did more than defend complementarianism and spent time celebrating its goodness?

Therefore, more than mere negative reactions, we need a proactive vision. In addition to a defensive "No," we need a positive, "Yes!" to God's good designs for men and women. The point of this essay is to affirm and articulate that God's complementarian design for men and women is a pathway to man's delight and God's glory. To state it another way in the idiom of John Piper, God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him *and his design*.

In what follows, I'll attempt to show how a focus on joy in God and his ways demonstrates why explaining, proclaiming, defending, *and celebrating* complementarianism is necessary work. Since serious joy and human flourishing are ordinarily found in embracing God and his created designs (Ps 43:4), then God's complementary design for men and women should be understood as a path to human happiness — lived out at home, in the church, and for the world. Complementarianism, then, should not merely be defended as a good idea; it should be proclaimed as God-glorifying, inherently beautiful, and deeply satisfying. The church's task is not simply to win an argument about roles and prohibitions, but to display a compelling vision of redeemed masculinity and femininity that leads to seriously joyful men and women.

GOD'S DESIGN IN NATURE AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

Any Christian account of nature and human flourishing should begin at creation. In Genesis, before we read of any prohibitions given to Adam and Eve, we find God's glorious design. From the start, God's design for manhood and womanhood is profoundly good.[4] Humanity is intentionally created male and female in the image of God (Gen 1:27). Maleness and femaleness are divine designs from a "very good" (Gen 1:31) start. Therefore, the distinction between man and woman, and their complementary designs, belong to that goodness.

Furthermore, in the Genesis narrative we find order and structure. God is Creator. Man and woman are creatures, living in God's presence and enjoying his rule.[5] This ordered relationship exists within the con-

[3] Throughout this paper, the reader will find the phrase "serious joy" used at various points. It is a phrase borrowed from John Piper and indicates a sense of joy that is not dependent on circumstances, is unshakeably rooted in our God and his designs, and rises above what the New Testament calls light and momentary affliction. For a full explanation, see John Piper, "Serious Joy, Cultural Conflict, and Christian Humility: Thoughts on Christian Education" (message, TCT/BCS Regional Conference, Memphis, November 8, 2019), https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/serious-joy-cultural-conflict-and-christian-humility.

[4] In other words, the opening pages of Genesis do not describe anthropological hierarchy as a necessary evil. Nor does the biblical account give the impression that sexual differentiation is a social construct. See Andrew T. Walker, "Gender and Sexuality," *Concise Theology, The Gospel Coalition*, January 15, 2020, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/gender-and-sexuality/.

[5] For this paradigm of Eden, and God's Kingdom, see Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Goldsworthy Trilogy: Gospel and Kingdom, Gospel and Wisdom, The Gospel in Revelation* (Carlisle: Authentic, 2001). I added the idea of "enjoying God's rule" in an effort

"From the start, God's design for manhood and womanhood is profoundly good. Humanity is intentionally created male and female in the image of God ... Therefore, the distinction between man and woman, and their complementary designs, belong to that goodness."

text of commands and prohibitions (eg., Gen 2:16-17). When the established order fails due to Adam and Eve disobeying God's word, sin enters the world and chaos ensues (Gen 3). Nature, the way God had established the world, was tossed into disarray. Independence from God's design led to chaos rather than happiness.

Not only did the first couple usurp the place of God in rejecting his rule for autonomy, they did so via disordered relationships with one another. Adam failed to lead the woman. In his passivity, he stood by while Eve, his "helper," engaged in conversation with the serpent, took the forbidden fruit, and ate. Adam should have protected his wife and tended the Garden he was commanded to "work" and "keep" (Gen 2:15) by tossing the serpent out. But he failed to lead and, thus, Eve, "usurped Adam's headship and led the way into sin."[6] Ever since then, men have embraced passivity or dominance toward their wives while women have longed to usurp the leadership role given to their husbands (Gen 3:16). So, not only do we see disorder in reference to the creatures usurping the place of the Creator, but disorder is evident in the very way man and woman related in the moment, a disorder still at work today.

We intuitively know that ordered living is a good thing. For instance, think about traffic laws. Traffic laws feel like a burden until somebody breaks the rules. Lane markers, stop signs, caution signs, speed limits — none of that exists to infringe on your freedom and fun. Those rules exist to protect. The lines on the highway create the context where you get where you're going in one piece!

"For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy" (Ps 92:4).

It's also how God's commands work. To submit to God's design is to live within the order of creation so that it may go well with you (cf. Deut 5:33; 6:1–3). To rebel against God's design is to drive the wrong way on the highway of life. You might get

to infuse a bit of Christian hedonism.

[6] Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., "Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1–3," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 107.

away with it for a while. But reality (and judgment) always catches up.

In short, we are created to exist within a structure, a divinely designed good order. And to be more specific, there's a complementarian order between man and woman built into creation. The deepest joys we'll ever know aren't found in rejecting God's design — they're found in receiving it gladly. God's boundaries were never meant to hold us back. Instead, God's designs are like road signs, lane markers on the highway leading to flourishing and happiness. Take this order away and you don't get free flowing traffic. You get traffic jams and car wrecks.

In what follows, we want to briefly show how God's specific complementarian designs for men and women in the home and at church leads to delight.[7]

JOYFUL COMPLEMENTARIANISM AT HOME: SACRIFICIAL LEADERSHIP AND GLAD SUBMISSION

The home becomes the primary place where biblical manhood and womanhood are displayed. It is in the home where men first take the lead in husbanding and fathering and women follow in glad submission.

First, men have the responsibility to lead in such a way that they point wives and children to Jesus in the gospel. In Ephesians 5, Paul roots marriage not in social categories but in the gospel mystery of Christ and the church. Godly husbands point (imperfectly) to Jesus. They lead like Jesus leads the church. They lay down their lives for their family in such a way that they point to the Lamb of God who laid down his life for the Bride (Eph 5:25–26). And when they step up to protect[8] (cf. John 15:13; Col 3:19), they reflect the warrior King who fights and wins our battles. What is more honorable for a man and of greater benefit to his family than living as an exemplar of Jesus, their Sovereign, Saving, and Satisfying King?[9]

What a gift it is when human beings, in any organization or institution, find themselves under the steady hand of good leadership. It was, after all, the Queen of Sheba who considered the wise leadership of Solomon and said, "happy are your men" (1 Kings 10:8). When husbands serve their families by exercising strong and sacrificial leadership, even the world may say, "happy is your home."

Wives, too, play a role in making the home a place of joy.[10] A wife has a unique opportunity to help Christians rejoice in Christ. Through her submission to her husband, she reflects the church's joyful trust in Christ (Eph 5:22–24; cf. Col 3:18). The church, the blood-bought bride of Jesus, lives and moves and has its being under the Lordship of Christ. Godly wives remind those with eyes to see that there is a happy existence under the authority of another.

When husbands lovingly lead and wives joyfully submit, marriage becomes a living portrait of the gospel. More than that, both husband and wife discover the happiness that comes from living in ac-

[7] Demonstrating how this design moves beyond the bounds of home and church and into world writ large will have to wait for a future essay.

[8] By "protect," I have various things in mind. Husbands should protect their wives physically, yes. But there are also ways a husband should protect their wives emotionally, sexually, and spiritually. Tim Challies, "Leadership in the Home—A Godly Man Protects," *Tim Challies (blog)*, December 3, 2009, https://www.challies.com/christian-living/leadership-in-the-home-a-godly-man-protects/.

[9] This phrase (sovereign, saving, satisfying), is something I have adopted from my friend and mentor, Dr. Jason DeRouchie.

[10] Consider the woman of Proverbs 31. A wife who "does [her husband] good" (31:12); "provides food for her household" (31:15); "she opens her hand to the poor and reaches out her hands to the needy" (31:20); "opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue" (31:26); indeed, "Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her" (31:28). All those things marking the life of a godly woman undoubtedly lead to serious joy within the walls of the home.



cordance with God's good design. God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him *and his design*.

COMPLEMENTARIANISM IN THE CHURCH: THE BEAUTY OF SPIRITUAL FATHERHOOD AND FLOURISHING SERVICE

The church likewise displays the goodness of God's ordering. Within the church, the structure is fairly simple. There are pastors, deacons, and church members. Complementarians assert that the office of pastor/elder/overseer is reserved for biblically qualified men in accordance with Scripture (1 Tim 2:12–14; 3:1–7).[11] Some complementarians believe women can serve within the diaconate as well, though this is a point of internal debate between complementarians. The membership of the church is open to both men and women equally. Thus, when Paul tells Titus to "put what remained in order" (Titus 1:5), there was an order to be implemented.

The pastoral office especially reflects spiritual fatherhood. Elders are called to protect doctrine, shepherd the flock, exercise sacrificial oversight, and model godliness.[12] This is not because men are inherently more intelligent or spiritually valuable, but

[11] Some object to any sort of role differentiation because they assume such ordering communicates lesser value. But that is a *non sequitur*. It simply does not follow that a different role equals different value. Just like the body has many members, and each member has its part to play, there is one body. Paul writes to Rome and says, "For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Rom 12:4–5). And when he makes the same point to the Corinthian church, he makes it clear that all the parts are important to the whole as he declares, "On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Cor 12:22).

[12] For the role of elders, see David Mathis, *Workers for Your Joy: The Call of Christ on Christian Workers*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022).

because God has created men and women in certain ways to inhabit certain roles in accordance with his good designs.

At the same time, women enrich the church in innumerable ways through discipleship, hospitality, wisdom, counsel, teaching other women and children, missions, mercy ministry, theological insight, prayer, and practical service. A healthy complementarian church does not marginalize women; it honors them by unleashing their indispensable gifts within God's design for the mission and ministry of the church. Therefore, complementarianism does not minimize women; it situates both men and women within a divinely ordered structure intended for the church's health and joy.

Indeed, some of the strongest critiques of complementarianism arise not from the doctrine itself but from distorted applications of it. Where men abdicate responsibility, suppress women's gifts, or confuse leadership with control, biblical complementarianism is betrayed rather than practiced. Just like in the Garden, chaos ensues.

Practically, this plays out in various ways. When elders bear the weight of doctrinal faithfulness and difficult pastoral decisions, women are freed to invest deeply in relationships, discipleship, and mercy ministry without also carrying the burden of final accountability (cf. Heb 13:17). Congregations that actively deploy women's gifts in appropriate complementary ways[13] tend to be healthier and more relationally rich than either rigid hierarchies or leaderless egalitarian structures.

None of this suggests unhappiness is impossible within complementarian churches and homes, or that happiness is absent elsewhere. Instead, complementarians argue that when God's design is convictionally embraced and practically implemented — when male leadership is real but not domineering, and female submission is happily received and their contribution is honored rather than minimized — the resulting order tends to produce the kind of relational peace, trust, and flourishing that leads to our serious joy and God's glory.

CONCLUSION: THE PLEASURE OF TRUSTING GOD

To bring this discussion home, remember that what begins in the garden and echoes through the home, the church, and the wider world is not a system of mere prohibitions or a scream of "No!" Instead, complementarianism, rightly understood, is a window into the very character of a God who delights in ordering his creation toward human flourishing rather than chaos.

The world says that freedom means self-rule, that happiness is found in throwing off every boundary and becoming whoever we wish to be or think we can become. But Scripture tells a truer story: that the deepest freedom is found on the other side of surrender, that the lines on the highway are not there to ruin our fun but to help us get home.

Complementarianism, then, is not merely defensible; it is beautiful. It is not merely true; it is good. And a church that recovers this vision will not just win arguments about roles and offices — it will become a living, breathing advertisement for the God who is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him and in the good world he has made. That is not a diminished vision of manhood and womanhood. That is serious joy.

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[13] Complementarians have for years highlighted appropriate roles for women in ministry. For instance, see Wayne Grudem, "But What Should Women Do in the Church?," *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 1, no. 2 (November 1995).

BOOK REVIEWS

REVIEWED BY LOUIS MARKOS

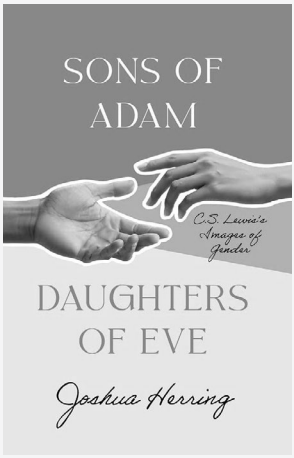
Sons of Adam, Daughters of Eve: C. S. Lewis's Images of Gender

Although there is a legitimate place in the church for hellfire and brimstone sermons, there should be more sermons that draw people to the love and mercy of God displayed in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and less that, literally, scare the hell out of them. That does not mean that sin should be downplayed or the holiness of God papered over; Jesus does not shy away from exposing the sins of hypocritical religious leaders and warning them of God's wrath to come (Matthew 23).

Still, Jesus more often calls individuals like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 3–4) and groups like those at his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) out of their brokenness, confusion, and sorrow to a higher vision of integrity and wholeness. In my own mentoring of students who struggle with gender identity, I have learned to focus on affirming their God-given masculinity or femininity in a manner that goes far deeper than the stereotypical interests and relational approaches that our society dictates for men and women.

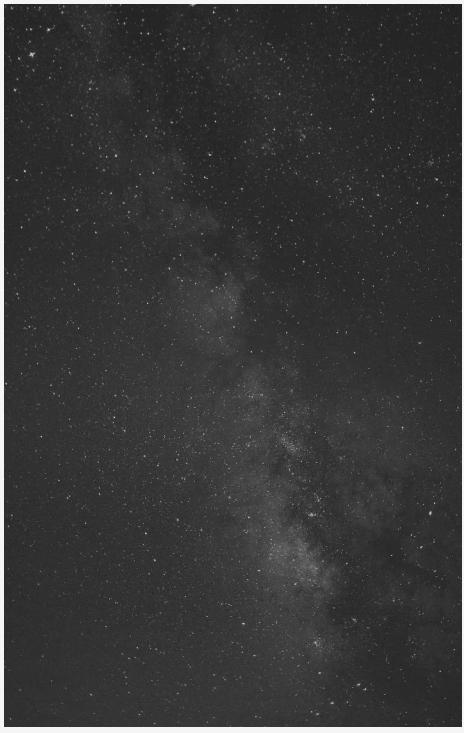
Instead of simply condemning the sin of transgenderism or homosexuality, how much better to promote the beauty, goodness, and truth of God's creation of gender — "So God created man in his own image, / in the image of God he created him; / male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27; ESV) — and of marriage — "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). Or, to express it in the words of a well-known hymn, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, / Look full in His wonderful face, / And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, / In the light of His glory and grace."

If we are serious about reaching our society



Joshua Herring. *Sons of Adam, Daughters of Eve: C. S. Lewis's Images of Gender*. Landrum, SC. The Davenant Press, 2026.

with the good news of Jesus, our message needs less condemnation and more vision; it needs to invite those who struggle with their gender and sexuality to embrace with understanding and gratitude God's gift of gender and heterosexual marriage. That, I am happy to say, is the approach that Joshua Herring takes in *Sons of Adam, Daughters of Eve: C. S. Lewis's Images of Gender*. Through close and parallel readings of Lewis's Ransom Trilogy, Chronicles of Narnia, and selected non-fictional works, Herring demonstrates that for Lewis, "all of reality is God's gift to his image-bearers" and that "we ought to receive the gift and express gratitude through our joy in its goodness. . . . Lewis suggests that Christians should, for the good of the gender-dysphoric person, invite all people to accept their gender and learn to love the God who made each one male or female in his image" (258).



Herring, professor of humanities and classical education at Thales College and founder of the Logres Institute for Classical Liberal Studies, takes this positive approach, mining from Lewis's work images of gender that celebrate God-given masculinity and femininity. However, like Socrates and Plato before him, Herring knows that he cannot properly define the true nature of gender before first deconstructing the false definitions that have increasingly come to dominate the last half century. He does so by accurately summarizing and fairly criticizing the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler.

THE MAKING OF FEMINISM'S MYTHS

The reason de Beauvoir and Butler have caused so much confusion, Herring argues, is that their redefining of gender was couched in a re-mythologizing of identity itself. "De Beauvoir," he explains, "famously claims that 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman.' . . . women are formed through social pressures and traditional institutions into the Other needed for male conquering and identity formation" (19-20). Femininity is not something that one is born with or that one possesses as an essential feature of one's created nature, but a social construct imposed upon the growing girl. "Rather than revolting against the formative society, the girl is shaped into one who resigns her autonomy and accepts her status as object of the male subject" (22).

Just as the worker in Marx's re-mythologizing of economics is alienated from the objects of his labor, so the woman, in de Beauvoir's re-mythologizing of gender and the relationship between the sexes, is alienated from her self. Ironically, despite her Marxist worldview, de Beauvoir holds up the workplace as the only arena where a woman can find true autonomy and self-identity. "De Beauvoir posits that woman is imprisoned by marriage and reproduction; her freedom lies in becoming an active economic agent through work, which establishes personhood" (25).

After summarizing de Beauvoir's thought, backing up his summary with representative excerpts from her influential book, *The Second Sex*, Herring offers his critique. "In essence, de Beauvoir wants women to become men; when they engage in masculine activities, they gain an equal subject-status alongside men. The new world she imagines is one without gender: men and women exist equally as subject, free to follow their desires without care for responsibilities. Her theory has no room for willing acceptance of responsibilities; any woman who would willingly become a mother, undergoing the mutilation of her body through the alienation of childbirth, has not yet overthrown the remaining object-status binding her to the male subject" (29).

The Second Sex was published in 1949, at the dawn of what many Americans consider the golden age of the traditional family. It took two decades for her myth to take root, fueling the sexual revolution, no-fault divorce, abortion-on-demand, and the mass exodus of women out of the home and into the workforce. The full breakdown of gender, however, awaited Butler's post-modern *Gender Trouble* (1990), which reduced not only gender but sex itself to a fluid designation free from any kind of fixed, essential nature. "Neither gender nor sex, Butler argues, is natural, but rather are constructions of socially expressed power. Disrupting that power becomes the avenue to freedom and authentic self-development" (36).

Paving the way for transgenderism's invasion of the public square, the academy-bound Butler insisted that "the task for an authentic human being is to use the autonomous will to shape the plastic self by rejecting reality as it presents itself in favor of the self-constructed reality" (37). For Butler, nothing is given: neither given in the sense of a gift from our creator, nor given in the sense of a founding principle that grounds reality. Everything is in flux:

natural or unnatural, right or wrong, normal or perverse, straight or crooked have no meaning because there is no fixed standard against which to measure them.

De Beauvoir and Butler's "philosophical mythmaking," Herring concludes, "advocates a rejection of the gift of gender in favor of radical autonomy" (41). How is one to answer this seismic shift in perception and imagination? "The way to refute such a myth," Herring argues, "is not through a consequentialist analysis of its results, but rather through a more true myth which begins from different presuppositions. For that analysis, C. S. Lewis proves an excellent guide. Where de Beauvoir and Butler see gender as a site of critique and oppression, Lewis proposes that it is instead a part of human nature, and an invitation to accept that which is given, explore the totality of the gift, and wonder at the ways complementary gifts between men and women enable flourishing lives together. The way to respond to bad philosophy, Lewis shows, is with good stories" (42).

GOD'S GENDER MYTH IN C.S. LEWIS' RANSOM TRILOGY

After an insightful chapter on how Lewis's views on gender were influenced by Spenser's *Fairie Queene* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Herring sets about identifying in Lewis's work images that can help our shattered, topsy-turvy world restore God's original myth of gender. For Lewis, Herring argues, gender, like math and the Tao —the word Lewis uses in *The Abolition of Man* to refer to the universal, cross-cultural moral/ethical code — is a key component of the objective (real) world created by God. It is a given, a first thing, something we argue from rather than for. Indeed, gender "is one of those places where humans experience the contact between the immanent, sensual reality and a higher intellectual level of reality" (102).

In his Ransom Trilogy, Lewis renders concrete the essential nature of masculinity and femininity in the contrasting geographies of the planets Mars (Malacandra) and Venus (Perelandra), in the complementary guardian spirits of those planets,



and in the equally complementary King and Queen that God (Maleldil) creates on Venus. In all three, masculinity and femininity as essences run deeper than biology, function, or language. "The masculine is primarily oriented outwards, with a rigid strength and watching eyes seeking to defend the home; the feminine is primarily oriented inwards, and is characterized by fluidity and fostering life, symbolized through the creation of a home" (122).

In his analysis of the characters that populate the Ransom Trilogy, Herring shows that men and women alike are strengthened by acquiring some of the traits connected to the opposite gender while embracing and embodying the essential gender they were given. This process includes a vital factor that runs counter to the prevailing post-modern myth of fluidity and autonomous individuality: obedience to proper authority, along with the humility that accompanies it.

In Ransom, who leads the good guys in *That Hideous Strength*, Herring finds a rich embodiment of biblical masculinity. "Ransom carries with him a *gravitas* commanding immediate respect. All who come into his presence recognize the authority he wields and must respond" (132). That response helps them to understand and to grow into their true selves. In sharp contrast, Wither, the leader of the bad guys, demeans and confuses all those who serve under him. Through Ransom and Wither, Lewis presents his readers with "two visions of authority, one based in clarity and one in obfuscation, one making more of its followers and one making less" (134).

In two of the women who serve under Ransom (Grace Ironwood) and Wither (Fairy Hardcastle), Herring identifies contrasting examples of women who assume masculine traits of authority but in radically different ways. "Ironwood illustrates the ways such a woman contributes strength to her community without losing her essential womanliness, while Hardcastle's brutish habits and sardonic tone and cheroots make her distasteful . . . Ironwood has a strength of character forged through her experiences that, yielded to right authority, adds to the value of the community. Hardcastle shows the extreme power and rigidity possible to a strong woman who refuses to yield to anyone else" (134).

GOD'S GENDER MYTH IN C.S. LEWIS' NARNIAD

In Lewis's Narniad, Herring finds equally contrasting images of masculinity that do or do not go "outward, leading and/or protecting" and femininity that do or do not go "inward, creating the conditions for life to flourish" (142). Thus, as illustrations of positive masculinity, Peter rescues his sisters in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (LWW); Cornelius "provides Caspian the formal education needed to help him move from childhood to manhood" (148) and Caspian and Peter embody "the necessity of the masculine to identify and oppose evil in the world" (151) in *Prince Caspian* (PC); Reepicheep and Caspian inspire courage in Eustace and the crew in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (VDT); the freed Rilian shows forth his kingly authority in his looks and bearing at the end of *The Silver Chair* (SC); and the martial Tirian and Jewel offer "the clearest example of masculine friendship in the Narniad" (166) in *The Last Battle* (LB).

In contrast, we see negative masculinity in Edmund's betrayal of his siblings in LWW; in Miraz the usurper who kills his brother and Nikabrik the dwarf who "seeks power without concern for the good" (190) in PC; in Governor Gumpas who, like Wither, is "a bureaucrat who excels at preventing action from occurring" (193) in VDT; in Rilian who "illustrates a masculinity ensnared by [the] toxic femininity" (195) of the Green Witch in SC; and in Rabadash's pride that "causes him to ignore the rules of war" (198) in *The Horse and His Boy* (HHB).

Positive femininity is glimpsed in "the feminine concern for the conditions of life [that] prompts [Mrs. Beaver's] awareness that even on an urgent journey, the group will need food" (169) in LWW; in Susan and Lucy accompanying Aslan "the source of joy in renewing Narnia" (174) while the boys fight in PC; in Lucy exercising "courage in a feminine manner" (176) by going into Coriakin's house to save lives rather than to win personal renown in VDT; and in the way "Polly's caution tempers Digory's adventurousness" (186) in *The Magician's Nephew* (MN).

Negative femininity, in contrast, is glimpsed in the White Witch, who "is not a source of warmth, fluidity, or life, but rather cold rigidity and death" (201) in LWW; in the Green Witch who "trades on her femininity to deceive the children" (204) in SC; in Aravis's initial pride which "manifests in a lack of compassion for a servant she uses to cover her escape" (205) in HHB; in the "affinity for power and death" (206) that Jadius manifests in MN; and in Susan's refusal to embrace with gratitude the life-giving gifts of Narnia and Aslan in LB.

Herring identifies more images of gender in Lewis's writings that possess the power to restore the true myth of gender our society has lost, but these should suffice. "Christians," he concludes, "require positive language to proclaim the goodness of gender as they combat gender ideology. Lewis equips his readers to reach that goal" (257). The sooner we equip the next generation with such images, the sooner they will be able to reassemble the shattered icons of masculinity and femininity they have inherited from the false myths of de Beauvoir, Butler, and their heirs.

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REVIEWED BY TRENT HUNTER

The Recovery of Family Life: Exposing the Limits of Modern Ideologies



I bought a lamp on Craigslist from a lady unpacking boxes. She was single, middle-aged, and new to town for a job. She found out I was a pastor and raised a hostile question about what Christians believe concerning marriage and gender. I answered. I did not expect her to cry but that's what she did.

In her own words, she had "never heard something so beautiful." Behind her confrontational question, she admitted, lurked a deep dissatisfaction and sense of loss. She had to explain her tears, after all. They surprised her too. Her family, schooling, and the field in which she worked defrauded her. Again, her words. My plain outline of the Christian vision resonated with her deepest desires. Here was a woman with an apparently designer life — single, successful, in control — alone in a new apartment and sad. It's a common story and Christians care.

IT'S GOOD TO SAY FEMINISM IS BAD

Feminism has not been good to women and I'm done hedging on it. Pornography, children without fathers, hook-up culture, plummeting birthrates, and transgender mutilation are among its fruits. Also among its fruits is a young lady in my community with a dog trained to attack the jugular on command. She's had bad experiences with men.

I used to say that feminism started good but went bad. But that was not a studied comment. It was a comment crafted to avoid identifying with a particular vision of the past whilst critiquing our culture's obvious departure from Christian norms. But there is more to the story and more to say.

Scott Yenor's book, *The Recovery of Family Life: Exposing the Limits of Modern Ideologies,* is the deeper-dive I've needed as

a pastor preaching in our times. Yenor's book is incredibly helpful in documenting the history of the sexual revolution and, crucially, where it is headed (ix, x). He outlines the damage caused and the intractable limits of human nature that frustrate its designs. Since his project largely addresses the breakdown and recovery of the family from the perspective of social sciences, I found myself craving arguments grounded in Scripture and the Christian tradition.

But Yenor deserves a hearing: his vision of family cuts with the grain of Scripture better than the vision on offer in many churches. His is not a book about going back to some dark ages where women were chained to the stove without shoes or forbidden from productivity. It's a book about how that portrait is neither true to the past nor the honor of homemaking. It's a book about how treating men and women as interchangeable cogs is not only impossible but undesirable. Who decided homemaking was a byword anyway, and why should we accept that premise (196)? This is a book about leaving our own truly dark age for arrangements that honor our differences as men and women — expressed in age-old grooves for relating with one another that we ignore to our harm.

As for working in the kitchen, Yenor helps make the kitchen great again by highlighting the deep meaning we have in marriage, children, and in sharing a common life as family, at the center of which is the forgotten joy of shared meals (196).

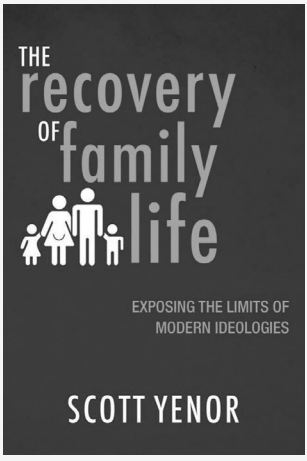
Yenor writes to recover this joy.

HER WEEPING IS THE SOUND OF "THE ROLLING REVOLUTION"

A strength of Yenor's book is its systematic organization. In three parts, *The Recovery of Family Life* describes three modern ideological streams — feminism, contemporary liberalism, and the movement for sexual liberation — that make up the sexual revolution. He exposes their limits, then points a way forward.

Feminism pursues the abolition of gender and, with it, marriage and family life (ch. 2). First wave feminism (1850–1920) worked to win legal rights for women — property, voting, etc. Sounds harmless enough, but the seeds of hostility to the "enslavement" of matrimony and motherhood were evident (18, cf. 63). These legal changes advanced a premise of women's oppression under "the patriarchy." The first wave sought to change marriage, the second wave to abolish the institution.

Starting in the 1950s, movement leaders were not happy with the free choices women were making, so second-wave feminists sought to change the desires of women and subvert their options with laws, "education," and cultural mores such as easy divorce (28, 55). This is a valuable insight, as it shows the "natural default" of women (evidenced by their free choices) when there was no onslaught of feminist propaganda. Today, all disparity short of 50/50 in a field indicates continuation of the patriarchy and discrimination (27). Except in some fields, such as plumbing or truck-driving, which rarely concern



Scott Yenor. *The Recovery of Family Life: Exposing the Limits of Modern Ideologies.* Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020.

feminists (98). If first-wave feminism divided man and women in the household, in the 1960s and 70s second wave feminism divided procreation from sex. Starting in the nineties, though Yenor does not utilize the label, third-wave feminists separated sex from gender. #MeToo and #BelieveAllWomen are the banners for what can be called fourth-wave feminism. Proponents refuse to identify womanhood with biology. So, here we are.

But feminism is only one of three ideologies that make up the sexual revolution. Meet feminism's two ugly stepsisters. Contemporary liberalism seeks to reorder the family as a state-centered institution blind to the natural relations of parents and children (ch. 3). Sexual liberationists want a world in which sex is as normal, free, public, and monotonous as eating a granola bar in a park — children included (ch. 4). Traditional morality is a "jailer" from which we need liberation, thus the unhooking of sex from babies and both from marriage (65). They are absolutely serious.

The "rolling revolution," as he calls it, is the result of these three streams in pursuit of the same goal: *the autonomous life* (10). For example, feminism advanced a radical individualizing of husband and wife. With gay marriage and transgenderism, the waves keep rolling. Most evangelicals are against gay marriage, but they don't realize it's the same principle at play. If men and women are more or less interchangeable, then why not two men or two women? Thus, it's a *rolling* revolution because there is no logical end in sight and revolutionaries entertain no principle for its restraint (x).

Except for the pesky limits of human nature, which Yenor explores in Part 2. Real and irrevocable sexual differences limit the ambitions of feminism (ch. 5). Contemporary liberalism may erode the form and quality of marriage but cannot erase the desire of couples to marry and build a family, proof that marriage is pre-political (ch. 6). And for all their trying, sexual liberationists just can't get us to treat sex like drinking a latte (ch. 7). For example, men and women feel differently after one-night stands. Moreover, not only do rape patterns reflect our differences, but rape degrades our humanity, both male and female, in ways that other acts of violence do not, such as a punch in the face (149). Sex is special. Reality is not "infinitely plastic" (2).

A NEW TERM FOR AN OLD VISION

There is much to tear down in the rolling revolution, but Yenor's work is also constructive. Yenor answers the rolling revolution with what he cleverly calls "womanism" (120). "Language traps us in the feminist view of the world," so Yenor proposes this new term to capture a vision for womanhood that fits the "bodily and psychological grooves specific to women" (119–120). Yenor aims at traditionally ordered family relationships that honor our different bodies and aspirations. Such a vision promotes the opening of jobs and possibilities for women, for example, but rejects the careerist vision that narrows women's horizons to work *outside* the home. Womanism, he writes, promotes independence to a point but not as a defining characteristic of what it means to be a human, man or woman (121).

Yenor's proposal accounts for more than differences of sex, but what unites us as humans. His proposal is theological:

> Above all womanism recognizes the truth that women are not simply victims and men simply oppressors: as Alexander Solzhenitsyn writes, the line dividing good and evil does not run between ideological classes, but through the heart of each man and each woman. Just as the line between good and evil runs through each of our hearts, it runs through each way society tries to rearrange gender and sexual relations. (123)

Yenor's extensive material on law — consent, rape, divorce, etc. — supports policy makers with arguments and sources for better public policy (chs. 8–12).

ONE-STOP-SHOP FOR THOSE SPEAKING TO THE TIMES

Critiquing feminism has become easier as our cultural denial of differences wreaks more havoc. In addition to the social maladies catalogued in this review, we've come to appreciate how prioritizing feminine sensibilities is deforming our culture. In 2023, I read that anonymous piece that made its rounds, "What is the Longhouse?" The author's anonymity speaks to the costs of critique, the article's popularity supported its thesis. In 2025, I read two pieces, one by Helen Andrews, "The Great Feminization," and another by Jacob Savage, "The Lost Generation." These resonated and primed me for Yenor's book, a masterclass in the history of contradictions that got us to this point.

At Boise State University, where Yenor was professor of political science, he reports some 330 linear feet of books on feminism, all written since 1980. We need faithful guides. Yenor brings us into his well-ordered study. Books and papers cover surfaces, timelines and maps fill the walls. It's a long and at times long-winded book. His arguments *roll* on and on, though he did warn (13). But this quirk is a feature just the same. Seventy pages of footnotes and bibliographic material make this a one-stop-shop for primary source analysis that proves the book's place: in the hands of those trusted to write and speak on these matters.

One of the values of Yenor's work is all the characters we meet in these descriptions. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) influenced Betty Friedan who



wrote *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Shulamith Firestone imagined a feminist revolution in her book *In The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970). Judith Butler extended Firestone's thought in her books *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Undoing Gender* (2004). Butler separated sex from gender and introduced drag and cross-dressing as ways to transgress norms in order to overwrite them. Such contours become familiar terrain.

As we learn, some movement-defining authors hide their cards and others don't. Beauvoir is among the latter: "no woman should be authorized to stay at home to raise her children," because "if there is a choice, too many women will make that one. … As long as the family and the myth of the family … are not destroyed … women will still be oppressed" (115). These are the intentions, arguments, and strategies ringing in the ears of professors and politicians, students and TikTok influencers, whether or not they can trace the origin of their sensibilities. Yenor pulls back the curtain on our own dysfunctional, delusional, and demonstrably unhappy times (198).

Another value of *The Recovery of Family Life* is Yenor's account of so many connections and contradictions. Contemporary liberals insist on detaching sex from marriage and marriage from children, yet default to natural parents in their dream of state-licensed Care Giving Units (56). Hook-up culture and pornography take the meaning out of sex under the guise of equality for men and women, even goading women to *act* like men in the name of women's empowerment (141, 255). A generation of men fail, since the maturity of male strength depends on the sexual resistance of women (238). And for all of the left's crying out for justice, the devastation of their politics and principles are most acutely felt among the poor, whose horizons shrink with the loss of a strong marriage culture (226).

One of the most profitable features of Yenor's volume is its catalog of empirically substantiated claims about differences between men and women. From agreeableness to athleticism to aggressiveness to sexual desire, the data shows what we all know: men and women are different (90–108, 185–189). Love minds these limits.

A SOLID LANDING, SOLID GROUND, AND NO MAP

Yenor saved his best creativity for the end. He stuck the landing. He delighted with a page-long speech in the mold of William Wallace, so we could hear what it sounds like to herald his proposal with compelling force (242). To close the volume, Yenor addresses popular slogans with pithy paragraph replies (ch. 13). Slogans such as, "Pedophilia is based on the rad-

"Yenor pulls back the curtain on our own dysfunctional, delusional, and demonstrably unhappy times."

ical notion that children are human beings," or, "You cannot legislate morality," or, "Believe all women." That last chapter was worth the cost of the book.

His landing was solid in that he held my interest to the end and satisfied his own goals. Insofar as he argued from the nature of the world, ontology, and real differences between men and women, he landed on solid ground — the world as it is. But as with any work of sociology, his roadmap for recovery is incomplete. For the pastor, you're going to want interaction with Scripture and the Christian tradition. You don't get that here.

Yenor appeals to Old Wisdom (10). He even makes profoundly theological claims (123). Yenor mentions God, Christianity, and religious belief a couple of times in positive ways (120, 169, 172, 210, etc.). The rolling revolution, he writes, "[strips] the Christian or traditional aspects of marriage" (9). But this is about as far as he goes rooting his vision in Christianity. Yenor exposes the limits of modern ideologies with skill. But when it came to charting the way forward — or, properly, backward — he did not drop his anchor in the Christian faith.

This surprised me at first. Yenor is more than a leading pro-family intellectual. He is a public Christian who writes elsewhere on Christian Education and chairs the board of an evangelical Protestant Christian school. But a look at the spine and another read through the preface clarified: Yenor wrote this book for Baylor University Press in part to persuade lukewarm revolutionaries of a better way. This is an academic work for the academy (x). He did not use the term sociology, but the scope of his work bears this out.

PICKING UP WHERE YENOR LEAVES OFF

Nevertheless, even within that frame, I wish Yenor would have more substantially engaged the Christian shape of the American family. Swiss-born Philip Schaff is one of many — including Alexis de Tocqueville — who have observed the freedom, protection, and honor of American women in the 1800s. In his *America: A Sketch of the Political, Social, and Religious Character of the United States of North America* (1855), Schaff observed:

> The American's profound respect for the female sex is well known. This old Germanic trait, celebrated so early as by Tacitus, has most fully developed itself in the Anglo-Saxon race under the influence of Christianity, and is very favorable to domestic and public morality. Whoever is acquainted with family life in England, knows how high and dignified a position woman holds there, and how much is comprehended in the term lady. America goes yet a step further. It is sometimes called woman's paradise.

That is not where we live today. The loss of Christian mores is part of the story. Yenor acknowledges this (9). I wish he would have explored this history further.

Picking up, then, where Yenor leaves off, there will be no true *Recovery of Family Life* apart from the God who gave us both life and the family. We are fighting false gods in this war of sex, after all, not simply one big unhappy misunderstanding. Neither Greece nor Rome will give it to us. Neither Islam, Hinduism, nor "secularism." Nor 1950s America for that matter. Christianity gave us Western civilization with its view of sex, marriage, children, and the value of women. Christianity is the only answer to the line of evil that runs through all humanity and all our failed attempts at "liberation." Christianity alone fits the natural sexual grooves Yenor skillfully describes. In this pastor's estimation, residual Christian culture is the best explanation for any hearing Yenor's proposal receives.

The uniqueness of the Christian gospel is my job security. Our world ravaged by the sexual revolution needs Christian preach-

ers and Christian homes. Those Christian homes are not traps for women for the tasks no one wants. The woman described in Proverbs 31 is industrious and intelligent, creative and capable, profitable, skillful, and strong. She works with her hands inside the home and out, all for the good of her household. She blesses them and they praise her. Yet it is her husband who is at the gates (Prov 31:23, 31). And as Scripture says, she is the weaker vessel, a truth that calls forth male strength, honor not exploitation (1 Pet 3:7). It's a truth we deny to the detriment of women. The Christian home is ordered to account for all of this, a place of honor and safety. It's a better bargain than an email job in a city where nobody knows your name. For, the center of civilization is not the corporate ladder, but the kitchen table; the family, not the individual. Christianity alone elevates women and honors their true strength.

First-wave feminism was not necessary for the achievement of women's full legal citizenship nor property rights. This could have been pursued without undermining the centrality and structure of the human family. To complement Yenor's fine book, read Rebekah Merkle's *Eve in Exile: And the Restoration of Femininity*.

Yenor holds exactly zero popular views. In his own words, "nothing will be easier to criticize than this book" (x). Yenor has my respect. He should have your attention.

SAY IT WITHOUT WINCING

Why emphasize feminism in this review of a book whose themes are broader? The movement for sexual liberation is something Christians rightly and loudly decry. But we are mostly quiet on feminism. A trick with a term disarms its enemies by playing off our understandable desire to avoid misunderstanding or sound-



ing mean. Thus, feminism is a uniquely pressing manifestation of the rolling revolution, the ideology whose plausibility adds force to the whole.

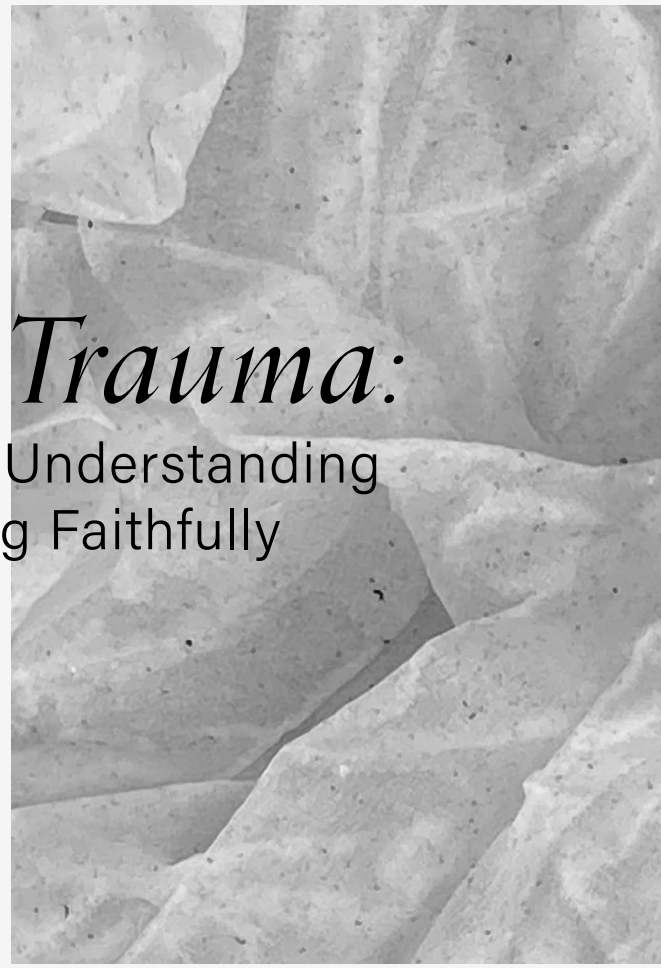
Here's the bottom line: Yenor gave this pastor studied confidence to say that to honor women we must oppose feminism — and to do so without wincing under the feminine gaze. By failing to recognize the limits of our sexed human nature, feminism and its ugly stepsisters attempt to reorganize the world in service of a vision of perfect sameness. This is both impossible and undesirable.

As we work to recover the family, let's tell women unpacking boxes about our good limitations and the good news of liberation. Jesus is the One who makes us truly human, male and female. He alone replaces hostility with harmony, yes even between the sexes. May our churches and homes prove it true. And let's treat them like ladies, even showing compassion for their plight. I'm with Yenor: "New Girls and single middle-aged women can be forgiven for thinking that they have been sold a false bill of goods" (237).

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REVIEWED BY SHELBI CULLEN

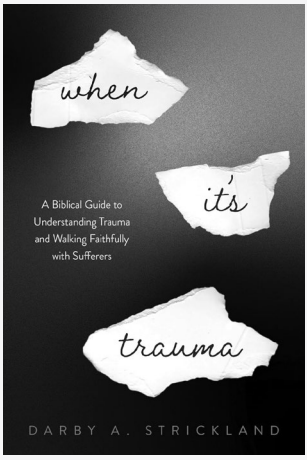


When It's Trauma:

A Biblical Guide to Understanding Trauma and Walking Faithfully with Sufferers

Caring for those who have endured profound suffering requires great tenderness. Darby A. Strickland's *When It's Trauma* offers helpful reminders that counselors should listen carefully, seek to understand suffering, and resist simplistic responses. Her compassion for sufferers is evident, many of her observations are insightful, and her emphasis on gospel hope and restoration is encouraging.

Yet compassion alone cannot establish a biblical counseling methodology. Because the ministry of soul care belongs to Christ, its message, methods, and context must be derived from his Word. A genuinely biblical counseling methodology is not constructed independently and then supported with biblical examples. It aris-



Darby A. Strickland. *When It's Trauma: A Biblical Guide to Understanding Trauma and Walking Faithfully with Sufferers*. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2025.



es from careful exegesis and sound theology. Method is the practical outworking of biblical truth, not a framework to which Scripture is subsequently attached.

It is at this foundational level that I have concerns with Strickland's approach.

SCRIPTURE AS FOUNDATION OR ILLUSTRATION?

Strickland regularly appeals to Scripture, yet the exegetical connection between the text and her counseling conclusions is not always sufficiently demonstrated. At times, contemporary trauma categories appear to provide the framework, with biblical passages subsequently employed to illustrate them.

"At times, contemporary trauma categories appear to provide the framework, with biblical passages subsequently employed to illustrate them."

Her treatment of Ruth and Naomi is one example. Naomi unquestionably endured devastating loss, and Ruth faithfully remained beside her. Yet describing Naomi as a trauma survivor and Ruth's faithfulness primarily as a "ministry of presence" risks making a contemporary counseling category the interpretive lens for the narrative. Ruth's declaration — "Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God" — expresses covenant loyalty within a narrative concerned with God's providence, covenant kindness, and redemption. Counseling applications may flow from Ruth, but they should arise from the theological meaning of the text.

Strickland's treatment of shame raises a similar concern. She gathers Adam and Eve, David in 2 Samuel 11, the Samaritan woman in John 4, and the hemorrhaging woman in Mark 5 beneath the category of those who hide because of shame. Yet these passages describe different spiritual realities. Adam and Eve explicitly hide following their rebellion; 2 Samuel 11 does not identify shame as David's motivation; John 4 does not attribute the Samaritan woman's actions to shame; and the hemorrhaging woman suffers from physical affliction and ceremonial uncleanness rather than moral guilt. A therapeutic category should not flatten distinctions the biblical text maintains.

WHY BIBLICAL CATEGORIES MATTER

This concern becomes more pronounced when Strickland introduces "relational hypervigilance." She defines the phenomenon and then turns to "Relational Trauma in Scripture," using David's flight from Saul as an example. The order matters. Rather than beginning with Scripture's own categories for understanding David's experience, a psychological category is established first and the biblical narrative is then interpreted through it. This pattern continues in later chapters, where trauma-informed categories such as avoidance and re-experiencing provide the framework for understanding sufferers' responses.

My concern is more than terminology. Strickland uses "relational hypervigilance" to describe heightened watchfulness and mistrust that can develop in relationships after betrayal or trauma. Yet biblical categories provide the moral and theological precision necessary for biblical change. What may be broadly described as hypervigilance could involve wise caution, fear, sinful suspicion, false guilt, anxiety, bitterness, or a desire for control — responses Scripture distinguishes and addresses differently. A broad psychological label may describe what a sufferer is experiencing without adequately identifying whether she needs comfort, protection, instruction, correction, repentance, or some combination of these. If biblical counseling seeks biblical change, its categories for understanding counselees must themselves arise from Scripture.

This distinction is especially important in Strickland's treatment of lament. Drawing from Psalm 22, she writes, "We do not need to correct their theology, offer platitudes, or fear a crisis of faith" (136).



Certainly, counselors should not answer profound suffering with superficial platitudes. But correcting false theology is not equivalent to offering a platitude.

Psalm 22 does not separate anguish from theological truth. David cries, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" but then declares, "Yet You are holy." He remembers God's faithfulness and eventually affirms that God "has not hidden His face" from the afflicted. Biblical lament gives full expression to anguish while bringing that anguish under the truth of God's character. Poorly ministered theology is not an argument for less theology, but for ministering theology more wisely. Compassionate counselors listen carefully while helping sufferers interpret suffering according to what God has revealed to be true.

WHERE IS THE CHURCH?

A further concern is ecclesiological. Strickland's model of care remains largely centered on the helper-sufferer relationship. She discusses assessment, psychiatric referral, and trauma-specific interventions such as EMDR, while pastors and the local church remain comparatively underdeveloped.

Scripture locates soul care within Christ's church, where shepherds watch over souls (Heb 13:17) and believers bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). Focused biblical counseling can be invaluable in complex cases, but it should ordinarily function within the shepherding ministry of the local church. If Scripture generates our methodology, it must shape both what we say and the context in which soul care occurs.

A GOVERNING QUESTION

The concerns raised here are necessarily selective. A brief review cannot engage every exegetical or methodological question raised by a work of this scope. Strickland's careful observations, emphasis on care, and concluding focus on gospel hope deserve appreciation.

Nevertheless, these examples represent a broader concern. Biblical counseling requires more than attaching biblical truth to otherwise helpful observations and methods. Scripture must define our anthropology, establish our categories, shape our methods, and govern the church's ministry of soul care.

Precisely because suffering people matter, the more complex their suffering, the more — not less — we need methods arising from God's Word. *When It's Trauma* therefore raises a question every biblical counselor should ask: *Are our methods flowing from Scripture, or are we asking Scripture to support methods developed elsewhere?*

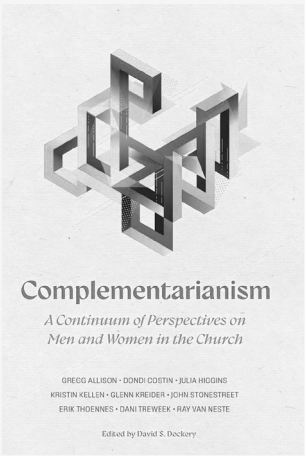
Clarity requires that we ask the question. Charity requires that we ask it fairly. Faithfulness requires that Scripture determine the answer.

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REVIEWED BY JARED MELLINGER

Complementarianism: A Continuum of Perspectives on Men and Women in the Church

This book is a rollercoaster ride: there are ups and downs, moments of delight and moments of anxiety. At times, I didn't know what was happening, and there was a sense of relief when it ended. I enjoy rollercoasters, and there are some things that I enjoyed and benefited from in *Complementarianism: A Continuum of Perspectives on Men and Women in the Church*. A few individual chapters are excellent. Taken as a whole, however, I would not recommend this particular ride to others unless they have already studied the key texts for themselves and have embraced sound complementarian convictions from Scripture.



David S. Dockery. *Complementarianism: A Continuum of Perspectives on Men and Women in the Church*. Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2026.

David Dockery explains in the Introduction that each contributor identifies as complementarian, "which means that we

all affirm the equality of men and women in both creation and redemption, while recognizing that Scripture teaches that men and women have distinct roles in the church (and in the home, but our focus in this volume is on matters of worship and ministry as it relates to the church)" (11). The participants "differ with our egalitarian brothers and sisters while rejecting feminist theology" and disagree with "those who would adopt inclusive language for God" (10). They are committed to biblical orthodoxy and they affirm the authority and inerrancy of Scripture (3). These convictions are commendable.

My concern is that the continuum of perspectives presented in this book is not consistent with the vision of complementarianism originally defined and celebrated by its founders. By referring to everything in the book as complementarian, the book contributes to the erosion of authentic complementarian convictions.[1]

THE MEANING OF COMPLEMENTARIANISM

Complementarianism is a term that was coined in the late 1980s as a shorthand to describe the content of the Danvers Statement.[2] The authors who wrote Danvers created the term, and Danvers therefore provides a creedal definition for its meaning. Complementarianism is not a minimalist vision, and the proof is that Danvers is not a minimalist statement.

Historic complementarianism, as articulated in Danvers, championed by The Council on Biblical Manhood & Womanhood (CBMW), and explained, defended, and applied in many resources[3] has a substantial definition. It cannot be reduced to one or two isolated restrictions, but is rather a broadly-applicable, positive vision for men and women everywhere. Complementarianism necessarily comes with a particular set of concerns, a set of theological commitments and priorities, a distinctive exegesis of key biblical texts, and specific implications for all of life, especially in the home and in the church.

But a troubling move is underway that, wittingly or unwittingly, results in untethering complementarianism from its historic identity. A broad continuum of perspectives is now being presented at the expense of the core commitments that define the movement.

Following an opening chapter by Gregg Allison, six contributors present their perspectives. One end of the continuum contains perspectives that closely align with John Piper, Wayne Grudem, and others who were involved in coining the term complementarian. From there, the continuum expands in the other direction, toward the minimizing of distinct roles: denying a husband's authority in marriage, allowing female pastors, and encouraging women to preach and teach the Word in mixed-gender settings, including

[1] I am eager to emphasize that my review of a single book edited by Dr. Dockery — a man who has authored or edited dozens of books — should not be interpreted as an assessment of his life and ministry. Dockery has faithfully served the church of Christ over four decades, and is a man of proven conviction, godly character, courage, and Christian scharity. Christians and leaders today have much to learn from his example. See Andy Pettigrew, *Steadfast: The Leadership Journey and Model of David S. Dockery* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Publishing, 2026).

[2] The Danvers Statement, https://cbmw.org/about/the-danvers-statement/.

[3] Primarily John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway 2021). See also Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than One Hundred Disputed Questions* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004); Andreas Köstenberger and Margaret Köstenberger, *God's Design for Man and Woman: A Biblical-Theological Survey* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014); Köstenberger and Schreiner, *Women in the Church: An Interpretation and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9–15*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016). More recently, see Claire Smith, *God's Good Design: What the Bible Really Says about Men and Women, 2nd ed.* (Waterloo, NSW: Matthias Media, 2019); Kevin DeYoung, *Men and Women in the Church: A Short, Biblical, Practical Introduction* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021); Denny Burk, *Mere Complementarianism: Male and Female in the Image of God* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2026).

the Sunday gathering. First Timothy 2:12, we are told by one contributor, only restricts women from preaching to men in the church until those women are trained.

Do these claims represent complementarianism? Are they what Danvers envisions? I contend that these claims do not reflect the teaching that united complementarian men and women in the late 1980s, but instead directly undermine and contradict that teaching. This fact should be concerning to all who care about faithfulness to the Bible's teaching on gender and the future of complementarianism.

My desire in this review is not so much to render a verdict on who is complementarian and who is not, but to faithfully maintain the vision of complementarianism as it was conceived by its founders and taught in Scripture.

BOUNDARIES ON BOTH SIDES

The health of complementarianism depends in part on preserving the original meaning of that designation. Before examining the specific chapters of *Complementarianism*, we need to establish the importance of maintaining definition and boundaries.[4]

No small part of Dr. Dockery's valuable legacy is his commitment to unity and cooperation. I appreciate the value of cultivating broader confessional unity among evangelicals, a unity that transcends denominational boundaries and

[4] David Dockery helpfully writes in the Introduction, "We recognize the importance of both conviction and theological boundaries, while seeking to manifest a spirit of cooperation and bridge building. We acknowledge that denominational heritages and distinctives matter" (4).



"Importantly, complementarianism has been concerned from the beginning to present the goodness and beauty of the biblical view of gender in a manner that distinguishes it from alternatives in both directions."

includes all of the brothers and sisters who contributed to this book. I believe we need more gospel-centered bridge building, not less; more of the convictional civility Dockery has championed throughout his life, not less. But I also believe it is important to maintain complementarianism's definition.[5]

Whenever we give attention to boundaries, there will be some who accuse us of spending most of our time gatekeeping and defending against error. It is certainly possible to give so much attention to tending the fences that we neglect the field where biblical manhood and womanhood are cultivated. When this happens, our approach to gender becomes combative and sectarian, rather than gracious and attractive.

But there is also danger in neglecting the fences, especially if people are working hard to knock them down. The way forward is to put our best efforts into cultivating a positive model of complementarianism while guarding it from all distortion. We should press on with charity, humility, and conviction, always being kind to brothers and sisters we disagree with, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3).

Importantly, complementarianism has been concerned from the beginning to present the goodness and beauty of the biblical view of gender in a manner that distinguishes it from alternatives in both directions. This goal is evident in Danvers. In recent years, the complementarian continuum has become unhelpfully broad on both ends. On the one end, there is a shallow complementarianism that is mixed with unbiblical egalitarianism. On the other end, there is a hyper complementarianism that is mixed with unbiblical patriarchy.[6]

[5] Christian unity is broader than Danvers complementarianism. But unity will not be advanced by altering definitions or seeking to make complementarian identity broader than it actually is.

[6] Complementarianism has always been concerned to distinguish itself from hierarchy and patriarchy. See Denny Burk, *Mere Complementarianism*, Appendix 4, "What about 'Biblical Patriarchy'?" Mary Kassian writes, "A proletariat-bourgeois-type hierarchy has no place in complementarity. Feminist theorists maintain that male-female role differences create an over-under hierarchy in which men, who are like the privileged, elite, French landowners (bourgeois) of the 18th century, keep women — who are like the lower, underprivileged class of workers (proletariat) — subservient. Complementarians, however, do not believe that men, as a group, rank higher than women. Men are not superior to women. Women are not the "second sex." . . . We rejected the term "hierarchicalism" because people associate it with an inherent, self-proclaimed right to rule." Kassian explains that the term patriarchy was rejected for similar reasons. Mary Kassian, "Complementarianism for Dummies," *The Gos-*

People tend to want boundaries on one side but not the other, depending on their own instincts or what they perceive as the greater threat. But complementarianism was intentionally formulated to guard against dangers and distortions on both sides.

There is no joy to be found in telling some advocates of patriarchy (on the right) and some advocates of egalitarian positions (on the left) that we don't think they are faithfully maintaining Danvers complementarianism. It's far easier to be accommodating than to call attention to borders and correct error. But the only way to prevent complementarianism from being distorted or diluted is to give attention to its boundaries. By the grace of God, we can irenically and graciously disagree on the breadth of faithful complementarian perspectives.

GREGG ALLISON: THE AVOIDANCE OF COMPLEMENTARIANISM?

In the first chapter, Gregg Allison intentionally avoids affirming anything distinctly complementarian, even as he expounds passages that are deeply relevant to complementarian convictions. Surprisingly, his chapter does not take sides in the complementarian-egalitarian debate.[7] This is a perplexing and unhelpful way to begin a book entitled *Complementarianism*. Allison's description of "significant differentiation" between men and women avoids explaining any differences in roles. His selection of five key passages on gender from the epistles does not include 1 Timothy 2:8–15 or Ephesians 5:22–33, and his treatment of 1 Peter 3:1–7 highlights several points but avoids mentioning submission.

Allison emphasizes that "there are no gender-specific gifts" (42). This statement requires greater explanation and qualification for two reasons: first, because Ephesians 4 uses the language of "gift" to describe offices that include pastor-teacher, and second, because the gift lists of Scripture are not exhaustive. Is there such a thing as a pastoral gift? Is there a preaching gift — a grace some receive to authoritatively teach sound doctrine and guard the apostolic deposit? Is there or has there ever been an apostolic gift? And if so, is it in keeping with biblical teaching to claim that none of these gifts are gender-specific?

Allison claims that complementarianism does not include metaphysical underpinnings regarding the fundamental nature of men and women, but rather is limited to a role-based framework for church ministry (28–29). This claim is inaccurate, and John Piper has soundly refuted it.[8] Danvers is broadly concerned with the nature of manhood and womanhood as part of God's created order, and believes that what it means to be men and women "should find an echo in every human heart" (Affirmation 2).

Allison's chapter certainly says true and valuable things. But including a foundational chapter that intentionally avoids complementarian convictions in a book on complementarianism inevitably has the effect of greatly minimizing the importance of those convictions. The result is that Allison's chapter weakens the project rather than strengthens it.

pel Coalition, September 4, 2012, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/complementarianism-for-dummies/.

[7] Dockery shares in the Preface that Allison served as a consultant and guide for this entire project. Allison's chapter, "Complementarity: A Foundational Commitment," is a condensed summary of his book, *Complementarity: Dignity, Difference, and Interdependence* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2025). For a review, see Steven Wedgeworth, "Man, Woman, Bridges, and Boundaries: A Review Essay of Gregg Allison's Complementarity: Dignity, Difference, and Interdependence" in *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology*, 7.2 (Fall 2025): 118–127, https://cbmw.org/2025/11/17/man-woman-bridges-and-boundaries-a-review-essay-of-gregg-allisons-complementarity-dignity-difference-and-interdependence/.

[8] John Piper, "Danvers, Nashville, and Early Complementarianism," *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 4.2 (Fall 2022): 28–34, https://cbmw.org/2022/11/17/danvers-nashville-and-early-complementarianism/.

HISTORIC COMPLEMENTARIAN CONTRIBUTIONS

The next three chapters — the contributions by Ray Van Neste, Julia B. Higgins, and Erik Thoennes — fall squarely within historic, Danvers complementarianism.

In chapter two, Ray Van Neste grounds complementarianism in how men and women are created: "The differences between men and women are not oddities that simply show up in roles in home and church but are part of the beauty in how God created us" (50). "This is not primarily an ecclesiological issue but an anthropological issue, dealing with how we are created. It then has implications for all of life including marriage and church" (50). He proceeds to examine 1 Timothy 2:8–15 and 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, giving wise practical counsel for the ministry of women in the church.

Julia B. Higgins calls attention to the beauty of complementarianism in adorning the gospel in chapter three, explaining"The practice of complementarianism is one way, among many, that the gospel is visibly demonstrated in the world" (74). Men are created to protect and provide, and women are created to nurture and care (84). Higgins celebrates her experience in a number of churches that have eagerly and faithfully applied complementarian convictions.

In the next chapter, CBMW board member Erik Thoennes writes self-consciously within the stream of historic complementarianism as espoused by Piper and Grudem: "Genesis 1–3 teaches that God creates men and women in his image, equal in essence but with key essential and functional differences" (101). Thoennes references natural law in support of his complementarian convictions and explicitly aligns himself with Kevin DeYoung's "broad complementarianism," the idea that the biblical teaching on men and women is broadly applied and relevant for all people.[9]

There are certainly differences among the authors of these three chapters. I do not agree with every application and perspective they provide. But these are the kinds of differences that existed among the writers of the Danvers Statement, CBMW Council Members, and the contributors to *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (RBMW)*.

KRISTEN KELLEN: STRAINING CONFESSIONAL COHERENCE WITH DANVERS

The following three chapters, in differing ways and to differing degrees, raise concerns or depart from historic complementarianism as taught in Danvers.

Kristen L. Kellen provides a perspective that she describes as falling between "minimum" and "moderate" complementarianism. She writes, "Within the church, my view is that the only limitation for women is the office of elder/overseer; women may . . . teach in mixed settings, should their consciences allow" (122), and "Women are free to exercise any spiritual gifts of leadership, teaching, or prophesying within their local church" (142). Citing the gifts of Ephesians 4, which includes apostles, shepherds, and teachers, Kellen says it is significant to note that this passage gives no indication of gender restrictions (132). She raises questions about the meaning of *kephalē* (head), arguing that Paul has multiple meanings in mind (134).

Kellen says that each year she "firmly and joyfully" affirms the Danvers Statement (123). However, there are a few things she writes that raise questions about that affirmation. Minimally, these are points

[9] See Kevin DeYoung, "The Beauty of Biblically Broad Complementarianism," *Christ Over All*, March 29, 2023, https://christoverall.com/article/concise/the-beauty-of-biblically-broad-complementarianism/.

that would benefit from greater clarity.

First, according to Kellen, the fact that men in the Old Testament ruled in the home and in religious life are simply descriptions, and this does not necessarily mean it should be emulated today (128–129). But this position appears to lack coherency with the Danvers Statement when it says, "Both Old and New Testaments also affirm the principle of male headship in the family and in the covenant community" (Affirmation 5).

Second, that the Spirit indwells all believers regardless of gender is, in Kellen's view, warrant for instruction in mixed-gender settings (132). In her treatment of 1 Timothy 2:12, she emphasizes the difficulty of translating the verse and concludes that Paul only forbids women from teaching as elders and from holding authoritative teaching positions in the church (137). Kellen gives significant latitude to women teaching men as she mentions no restrictions. I question how this perspective aligns with Affirmation 8 of Danvers when it references "Biblical criteria for particular ministries" and cites 1 Timothy 2:11–15, which forbids women from the function of teaching or exercising authority over men.[10]

Third, Kellen raises the question of "whether or not submission was in place prior to Genesis 3" alongside the question of eternal functional subordination in the Trinity (140, footnote 67). While Kellen does not provide her view on the former issue, the Danvers Statement is clear: "Adam's headship in marriage was established by God before the Fall, and was not a result of sin" (Affirmation 3). While eternal functional subordination and its variants are nowhere to be found in Danvers, the belief in Adam's pre-fall headship in marriage represents confessional complementarianism.

GLENN KREIDER: ABANDONING COMPLEMENTARIANISM

Glenn R. Kreider's contribution is plainly outside the boundaries of complementarianism as defined by Danvers. Regarding marriage, Kreider says,

> I believe that a married couple should be encouraged to find what works for them in their relationship. I do not believe the Bible mandates that the husband has authority over his wife. My own position is that some form of mutual submission/servanthood could be the ideal within the marriage relationship (150).

With respect to the church, citing Sam Storms, Kreider believes that "when the New Testament refers to pastor, it is not an office, but a function" (151). Therefore, women can be pastors. "Further, I don't see where the New Testament limits the function of pastoring to elders, nor does it limit responsibility for teaching sound doctrine to elders" (152).

Furthermore, Kreider also questions the complementarian understanding of *kephalē*, undermining its connection to authority: "Sometimes 'head' indicates authority and other times source or origin, or perhaps both at the same time or all three at once, or a combination of two" (155).

His summary of biblical and theological considerations contains the following:

> Since there were women serving in leadership in the Scriptures — Miriam, Deborah, Esther, Huldah, Anna,

[10] Danvers is also clear that "some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men" (Affirmation 6), again citing 1 Timothy 2:11–15. Denny Burk writes, "The Danvers Statement does not specify in so many words whether women may fill the pulpit on Sunday mornings. What it does state is that 'some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men.' At the very least, Danvers seems to restrict women from the primary preaching platform of the church. If it isn't referring to that, then what would it be referring to?" (Burk, *Mere Complementarianism*, 228)

> Phoebe, Prisca/Priscilla, and Junia, among others — it is unlikely that Paul would forbid women to speak or exercise authority. The 'silence' in 1 Corinthians 14 pertains to the evaluation of prophecy. Since one would need to know the Scriptures to evaluate prophecy, when women prophets were trained in the Scriptures they could participate in the process. Similarly, in 1 Timothy Paul forbids women to teach, presumably until they have been trained (165).

Despite being made under the banner of complementarianism, these are classic egalitarian arguments that arise from the "hermeneutical oddities" Danvers warns against.[11] Kreider believes that so long as a woman has been trained, she should teach men and exercise authority over men in the church. His position is clear: "I believe women can teach in mixed groups; I see no reason to exclude qualified women from exercising their gifts of teaching in the life of the church, especially when encouraged to do so by the elders, and this can include preaching" (167). To further his point, he argues that a pastoral staff could be made up of men and women (167). Despite being given the label, these positions are not recognizably complementarian in any meaningful sense of the word.

DANIELLE TREWEEK: CRITIQUING CONTEMPORARY COMPLEMENTARIANISM

Danielle Treweek has written a lively chapter that is difficult to review. Treweek is an ordained Anglican deacon and a member of the Australian Anglican General Synod. She refers elsewhere to her extensive experience in pastoral ministry.

I appreciate Treweek's concern to address the fundamental reality of what it means to be a man or woman, her stated commitment to the Danvers Statement, her candor in critiquing contemporary complementarianism, and her careful treatment of 1 Timothy 2:8–15 and 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. Treweek's ministry has been a help to many singles and to churches as they care for and deploy singles in ministry. Complementarianism does not prohibit women from serving in the office of deacon.[12] Her biblical scholarship in writing commentaries for the church is appropriate and commendable.[13] On the issue of women preaching in Sunday services, Treweek helpfully writes, "I do not believe the practice is consistent with or permitted by the full rationale of 1 Tim 2:11–12 and broader biblical teaching about male eldership, oversight, and authority in the church" (195, footnote 53).

Despite these commendations, Treweek's chapter contains several weaknesses. First, she repeatedly presents the historic scope and purpose of complementarianism as much narrower than it was (and is). This framing distorts complementarianism and limits its value in addressing current gender confusion. Treweek overstates the extent to which the Danvers Statement and *RBMW* emphasize the functional relation of the sexes. "Complementarianism was never built to handle the kind of heavy lifting that it is now expected to carry by many

[11] Rationale 8 of Danvers expresses deep concern for "the increasing prevalence and acceptance of hermeneutical oddities devised to reinterpret apparently plain meanings of Biblical texts." Rationale 9 notes that these represent "the consequent threat to Biblical authority." Ligon Duncan writes, "The gymnastics required to get from 'I do not allow a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man,' in the Bible, to 'I do allow a woman to teach and to exercise authority over a man' in the actual practice of the local church, are devastating to the functional authority of the Scripture in the life of the people of God." J. Ligon Duncan, "Why 'Together for the Gospel' Embraces Complementarianism," *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 13.1 (2008): 25.

[12] Faithful complementarians have differing perspectives on female deacons, with John Piper, Wayne Grudem, and Thomas Schreiner affirming them, while Kevin DeYoung, Ligon Duncan, and Denny Burk believe the office is restricted to men. In church traditions where deacons perform the functions described in 1 Timothy 2:12 — functions rightly belonging to elders — complementarians agree that women should not serve as deacons.

[13] Ray Van Neste is correct when he writes, "it is appropriate for women to write in the field of biblical studies and theology" (56).

of its own advocates. . . . Complementarianism was not intended to be a totalizing account of the fundamental distinctions between all men and women in all spheres of life across all time" (179). She suggests that complementarianism at its inception gave little to no attention to the fundamental reality of gender and what it means to be a man or woman. But, as John Piper has pointed out, this characterization is simply not true.[14]

Second, Treweek advocates for a "comprehensive anthropological apologetic" that is devoid of anything distinctly complementarian. This, she says, is what Gregg Allison provides in the first chapter. It should go without saying that a complementarian "comprehensive anthropological apologetic" should be characterized by distinctly complementarian convictions.

Third, Treweek seems to adopt a generally critical posture toward contemporary complementarianism. It is difficult to overcome the impression, at least based on this chapter, that when it comes to CBMW, *Eikon*, and other leading complementarian voices, Treweek seems to be more of a detractor rather than a supporter.[15] While complementarians must always be ready to receive correction from one another, Treweek's chapter exudes a critical posture towards the contemporary forms of complementarianism that are most in keeping with the vision of those who coined the term.

Fourth, she advocates for "sexed vocational mutuality" in an ill-defined manner, which raises questions about whether there are distinct vocational responsibilities for men and women. Specifically, Treweek considers it unfortunate that a women's vocational responsibility would be principally located within the home, while men fill broader vocational roles. She approvingly cites an egalitarian author who is critical of the complementarian "family blueprint" that wives should take responsibility for the home while husbands provide for the family (181, footnote 19). Treweek's view appears to be in contrast to the Danvers Statement when it expresses deep concern regarding "the widespread ambivalence regarding the values of motherhood, vocational homemaking, and the many ministries historically performed by women" (Rationale 4).

A FITTING AFTERWORD

I have spent more time on the last three perspectives than the first three perspectives, and have spent more time outlining disagreements than points of agreement. This is because of the nature of the project, and the fact that the entire book is entitled *Complementarianism*.

The reason for this is to demonstrate how some contributors to the project stretch the label "complementarian" in ways that do not faithfully represent the theological vision of those who coined the term. The result is that the definition and meaning of the term "complementarianism" is unhelpfully expanded. More important-

[14] As Treweek herself notes, ontological equality is present in Danvers. John Piper writes, "'Nature arguments' abound in *RBMW*. Not only does it have a full chapter dedicated to 'The Biological Basis for Gender-Specific Behavior,' but more importantly, it was a fundamental premise of the entire book that: 'Masculinity and femininity are rooted in who we are by nature. They are not simply reflexes of a marriage relationship. Man does not become man by getting married.' (xxvi) 'We are concerned not merely with the behavioral roles of men and women but also with the underlying nature of manhood and womanhood themselves,' Piper, "Danvers, Nashville, and Early Complementarianism," 60.

[15] Among Treweek's criticisms is the concern that contemporary complementarians like Kevin DeYoung and CBMW associates are asking far too much of complementarianism (178). She references structural weaknesses in contemporary complementarianism (179). She says: Complementarians are prone to rush past the essential equality of men and women (180); complementarian readings of Genesis 1–2 often display unhelpful predispositions (181); contemporary complementarianism too often creates a binary separation between domesticity and the public sphere of work (182); "many prominent male complementarian voices seem to spend magnitudes more time and energy shoring up restrictions on women's ministry (i.e., defending against egalitarianism) than they do promoting and honoring the faithful and fruitful ministry of women within the household of God (i.e., promoting an authentic complementarianism)" (183); and she criticizes the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood for not employing a female staff member since 2018 (183).

ly, however, are the unbiblical positions that are advocated under the banner of complementarianism. My concern for this book is how it may function, whether intentionally or inadvertently, to redefine complementarianism beyond Danvers in an unbiblical direction.

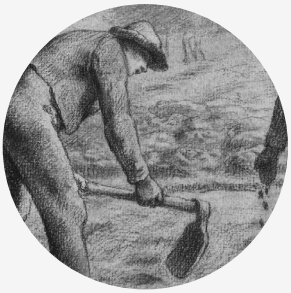
Complementarianism confirms my sense that not all who claim to be complementarian are within the boundaries of the historic meaning of the term, and not all who claim the designation should be spokespersons and teachers for the movement.

The Afterword begins with this sentence: "Roles are socially constructed things, contingent, to some degree, on the traditions and innovations of a particular culture." Meanwhile, in my other ear, Danvers tells me that gender roles are emphatically *not* socially constructed things: "Distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order, and should find an echo in every human heart" (Affirmation 2).

While I pray that all who take up this book will benefit from it, they will need a solid dose of theological discernment to be able to distinguish complementarian truth from error.

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REVIEWED BY DREW HUNTER





The Redeemed Man

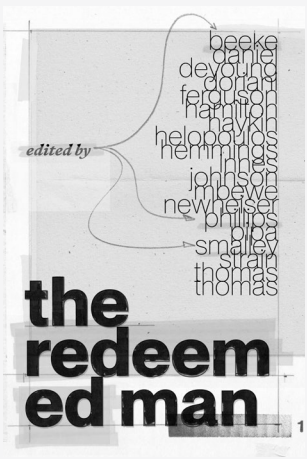




There are obvious reasons why we are seeing so many books published on the topic of manhood. Men are looking for wisdom, examples, and practical guidance on how to live well *as men*. They have not received clear instruction or seen good examples, so they are left hungry for help.

Some books on manhood exclusively focus on young men. Others are written to help older Christians finish well. Some books focus on a particular topic — how to be a husband, a father, a friend, a faithful worker. But what about one resource to give a Christian man biblical wisdom for the whole of life?

That's what the editors of *The Redeemed Man* seek to provide. The three editors — Joel Beeke, Richard Phillips, and Paul Smalley — "produced this volume because we perceive the need for a comprehensive and up-to-date guide for Christian men that is distinctively biblical in its approach" (2). Their goal is for this to be "a single comprehensive book that could be handed to a believing man and speak to the whole of his life" (2). In order to do this, they pulled together sixteen additional authors to join them in writing on a variety of topics related to Christian manhood. Their audience is Christian men of any age, and they are seeking to provide biblical instruction for every part of life.



Joel R. Beeke, Richard D. Phillips, and Paul M. Smalley, eds. *The Redeemed Man*. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2025.

In this review, I will briefly summarize the contents, note a few strengths, and identify a few weaknesses that could have been shored up to make the book even better. In light of this, I'll clarify for whom this book is best suited.

SUMMARY

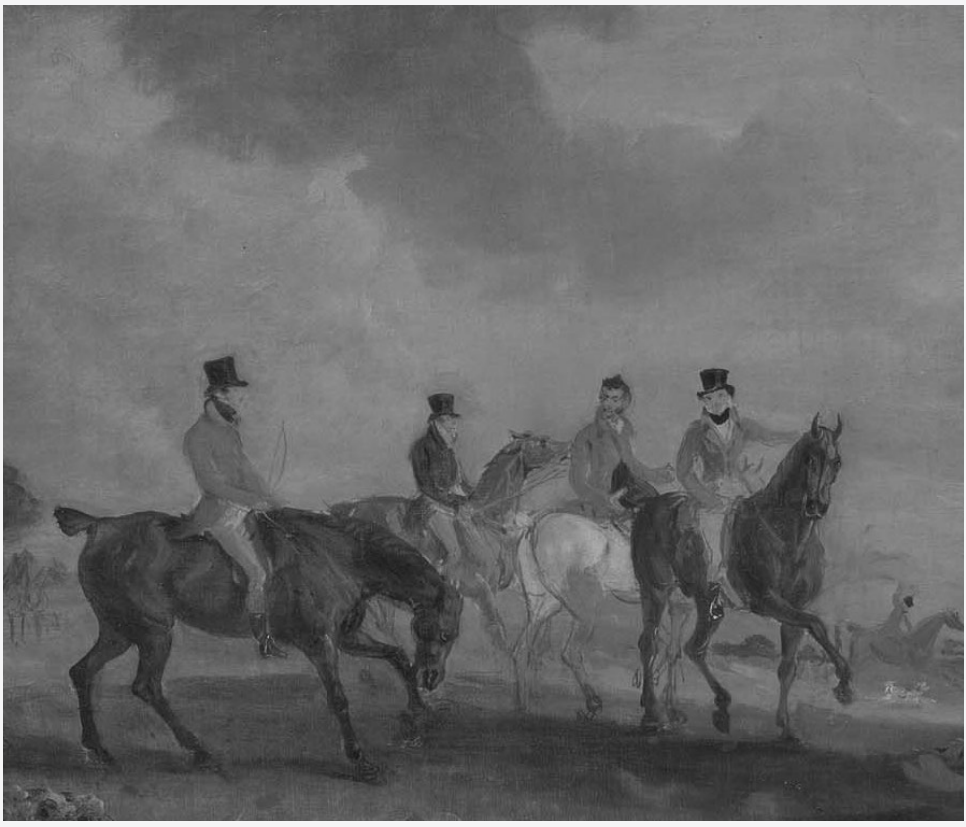
The Redeemed Man is organized in four parts, each of which focuses on one broad area of life. Part One includes four chapters that address a man's relationship with God, focusing on the starting point of repentance and faith, knowing God, engaging with God's Word, and growing as a Christian by grace.

Part Two moves from our vertical relationship with God to our horizontal relationships with others. Here the comprehensiveness of the book shines. It covers not only the expected relationships with a wife and children, but also includes chapters on relating to parents (chapter 5), living in singleness (chapter 6), cultivating friendships (chapter 11), and witnessing to unbelievers (chapter 12).

Part Three is framed as focusing on "A Godly Man's Work," but it is actually quite broad, including chapters on work, retirement, serving in church, managing resources, enjoying recreation, and living as a citizen. Part Four concludes with four chapters on faithfulness and finishing well, addressing our health, perseverance in the faith, entering retirement, and preparing for death.

EVALUATION

One of the editors' goals was to provide a distinctly *biblical* guide to Christian manhood, and they accomplished that. This is a biblically saturated and theologically



sound work. The editors chose theologically faithful pastors and authors to address areas of their particular specialty. A consistent vision of biblical manhood is carried through the whole of the book. They give a vision of men who have responsibilities within various roles (as Christians, sons, husbands, fathers, and friends), within different spheres (personal, family, work, culture), and within different stages of life (working years, retirement, and even finishing well by preparing for death).

The other goal was for this to be a *comprehensive* guide. Many books on manhood seek to speak to the various areas of a man's life, but they often leave out key aspects and roles. For example, many fail to cover the topic of friendship, which is a significant oversight, especially in our culture that is increasingly socially isolated and lonely. Some books address the role of husband and father, but they do not directly speak to the topic of singleness, which is relevant not only to men who will never be married, but also to men before marriage and after a marriage ends through divorce or death. *The Redeemed Man* addresses both of these, and includes chapters on other largely neglected but critical topics: honoring parents, caring for our health, properly valuing recreation, engaging culture as a citizen, retirement, and preparing for death. It's hard to find a critical topic that this book neglects to cover. We can perhaps think of a few — how to relate to women in general, how to find and be a mentor, how to participate in global missions, for example — but the editors accomplished their goal of comprehensiveness.

While a strength of this book is certainly that many theologically sound authors were chosen to write various chapters, there are two corresponding weaknesses to this approach. First, with nineteen dif-

ferent authors, there is noticeable repetitiveness throughout the book. Many of the authors laid a biblical foundation for their topic by returning to Genesis 1–3 — an important foundation, to be sure, but it became redundant when returned to so often. Additionally, the topic of family worship was addressed in a very similar manner in three consecutive chapters: It was included in the chapter on leading one's family (chapter 8), followed by another installment in the next chapter on discipling children (chapter 9), and then even more thoroughly in a chapter entirely devoted to that topic (chapter 10). Similarly, two chapters in a row considered the topic of work from very similar angles (chapters 13 and 14), and then another one on retirement retread some of the same ground in establishing a theology of work as the backdrop to thinking about retirement (chapter 21). This weakness could be shored up with a bit more editorial guidance, or perhaps another round of editing that provided feedback to authors to adjust their work in light of the content of other chapters. The result would have been a more concise, less redundant work. This kind of editorial work could have also minimized the too-often-repeated reference to "the redeemed man," which was overused throughout the book.

One more weakness that corresponds to the strength of many authors is a sense of unevenness across the book, especially regarding practical guidance. Some chapters were very strong (for example, on singleness, family worship, evangelizing to unbelievers), while others were weaker in this area. Practical guidance might be heavy in a chapter that didn't so much call for it while chapters that seemed to call for it were light on pointers. Many chapters were heavy on biblical instruction and exhortation, but thin on personal engagement and practical insights.

Bottom line: *The Redeemed Man* is a good book with great content by reliable authors, but for want of more careful planning and editorial coordination, the book is less than the sum of its parts.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK?

The key question we ask of a book like this is whether it accomplished what the editors and authors were hoping to accomplish. For this book in particular, is this the one book you can hand to a Christian man that is comprehensive and accessible, covering all areas of life?

The answer is *yes*. I would recommend this book without hesitation, but I would also recommend it to men with a couple of minor qualifications: expect some repetitiveness, and expect for some chapters to be much better, more compelling, and more helpful than others. It is a single-volume overview, but it will require some supplemental reading and guidance on certain topics. This is a valuable resource for men to read, fathers to give sons, and for groups to read together.

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eikon

Know that the LORD Himself is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.

PSALM 100:3, NASB

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