



ECO

A Covenant Order
of Evangelical
Presbyterians

Gender, Sex, and the Kingdom Theology Resources

2025

Gender and Sexuality—Theology Resources
ECO Theology Series
Standing Theology Committee

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The STC dedicates this book to the memory of one of our own team members who sadly passed away during the formation of this book and work.

To Rev. Dr. Rachel Stahle

“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.” Matthew 25:21

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Introduction to ECO Theology Series

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” — Romans 12:2

“Historically, the Presbyterian tradition has been especially called to explore what it is to love God with all our minds, being committed to the ongoing project of Christian education and study at all levels of Christian life.” (ECO Essential Tenets III.D).

ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians is committed to the renewal of our minds in the twenty-first century. This century is unprecedented in the church’s history. Christianity is moving from its historical centers in European countries and those places Europeans settled, to countries of the global south. Churches do not enjoy the same power in the secular arena they did in ages past. Secular humanism, the rise and dominance of a technological environment, and mass globalization have transformed the way Christians have to think. These are the patterns of the world. They are facts on the ground. But this is a radically different world than that of Jesus’s time, the time of Constantine and the Council of Nicaea, the high Middle Ages, the Reformation, or even of the period of revivalism. Although our theological traditions have equipped us in some ways, we need to confront our new world head-on, understand it, and seek to bring the message of the reconciliation of all things in Christ to this world. To do that, we must have our minds renewed.

This series of books is designed to equip you in the process of having your mind renewed. This renewal is never easy. It requires that we analyze the normal patterns of thinking around us. We have to reevaluate our traditional beliefs according to the Word of God. We have to ask where our forebears have been blind in the past due to their cultural situation and discern how we might be blinded by our own cultural beliefs. With confidence in beliefs that are thoroughly rooted in the Word of God that are communicable to the people of this present evil age, we can shine the light of the kingdom of God to a dark and dying world.

We have hope: hope in the kingdom of God, hope in the resurrection of the dead, hope in the renewal of all creation. We are a people of hope with a message of hope. But we must be able to communicate that hope. These books aim to equip you to explain the hope that is within you (1 Peter 3:15).

Gender and Sexuality Introduction

One of the largest changes over the past century in the Western world has been in society's understanding of what the human body is, is for, to whom it belongs, and how it defines a personality. We believe that simple moralizations of these social changes aids in social polarization that does not benefit the church or the ministry of Jesus Christ with which the church has been entrusted.

This book is designed to dig deeper than many other conversations about gender and sexuality. Theology opens a different avenue for understanding human bodies and society than conversations that are limited to human biology and sociology alone. But theology done in isolation from developments in other fields risks speaking into a rather small echo-chamber. This book aims to integrate biblical, theological, and human fields of study to help us approach the "ministry of reconciliation" as "ambassadors" rather than culture warriors.¹ Our aim is not to offer arguments to uphold a bulwark against progressivism, nor to excoriate conservatives with name-calling, but to see in every person an individual life for whom Jesus lived and died, and to whom we have been called to *agapeic* "love."²

Included in this book is a statement that this team authored, and the ECO Synod Executive Council approved for publication in 2024. ***All views expressed in this book outside of that statement are the opinions of their respective authors and do not represent official perspectives of ECO, which are confined to the Essential Tenets of ECO.***

Ministry is challenging and we hope this book proves beneficial as you seek to not only engage with an ever-changing world, but with our own traditions and beliefs in ways that bring us ever more into conformity to the image of God in Christ.

¹ 2 Cor 5:20.

² See chapter 6.

Gender, Sex, and the Kingdom

The following document was officially approved by the ECO Synod Executive Council and published in 2024. It represents a statement of beliefs that ECO holds in line with its *Essential Tenets*, which alone remains the constitutional document governing the theology of ECO.

The preamble pastoral letter was not adopted by the Synod Executive Council but was drafted by the Standing Theology Committee with the intention of contextualizing statements of truth within pastoral care.

Pastoral Letter

The inviolable foundation of ECO is the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is revealed for us in Holy Scripture, brought to light again in the Confessions of the Reformation, and clarified in our Essential Tenets. Therefore, we call our congregations to steadfastness in prayer, and steadfastly to gather around those pastors and teachers who obey Christ's command to love our neighbor as ourselves, as evidence of our love for God. In particular, we encourage our churches to pursue deeper awareness of contemporary struggles surrounding issues of gender and sexuality, and to grow as a people of welcome toward those who identify as sexual minorities. We exhort one another as Christians to obey the command to love our neighbors as ourselves (Lev 19:18; Matt 5:43; Matt 9:19; Matt 22:39; Gal 5:14; James 2:8) and remember that we who have received this free gift of grace are called to a ministry that freely gives grace to others. (Matt 10:8b; 1 Cor 2:12; Eph 1:6)

Issues surrounding LGBTQ+ identities are complex and, for those not personally affected, also very unfamiliar. Pastors and leaders today are confronted by competing voices in our polarized culture and thus need guidance and encouragement from the Word of God to navigate these difficulties. This document is intended to provide assistance in untangling competing claims in a way that honors our theological commitments and faithfully addresses issues of gender and sexuality as well as the church's temptation to solve our problems through politics and alliances.

We observe that many LGBTQ+ people have been wounded by a church that has treated them primarily as irredeemable sinners. We especially notice that these challenges do not come to the church only from the secular

culture, but are also increasingly experienced by our own children and youth who have grown up in our churches. Therefore, we offer this document to help nurture effective ministry toward those whose understanding of the gospel of grace has been devastated by a failure to engage them in a healthy way on issues of gender identity and sexuality.

We implore our pastors to educate themselves on these unfamiliar and difficult issues, and our belief in Christian eschatological identity independent of sexual expression in human relationship, free from stereotypical gendered roles and expectations. (Matt 22:30; Gal 3:28; Rev 21:5) We encourage church leaders to resist a rush to judgement and heed Jesus' command to make disciples, learning together to love people who self-identify in ways that appear to challenge the faith we affirm. We lament that the church's actions have too often alienated and demeaned others when we should have shown hospitality, serving like Jesus, regardless of their status.

We urge one another to amplify ministry toward those seeking to understand God's view on issues of gender identity, sexuality, and marriage. We recognize in humility that these are delicate and personal conversations that require great gentleness and godly wisdom, so that we all may be transformed more closely into the likeness of Christ, who loved and died for sinners while we were still his enemies (Rom 5:8).

The Standing Theology Committee, 2023

STC Statement

1. *Our New Life in Christ*

See, I am making all things new.

Revelation 21:5¹

Gender and sexuality, like all human life, must be viewed through the lens of the Gospel, understanding that Jesus Christ is making all things new.

We affirm that life in Christ is lived forward in hope—not backward in longing, pain, or regret. The unrelenting call of all women and men is to be reconciled to God in Jesus Christ, joining the kingdom he came to establish. We are promised, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”²

We affirm this not only as future promise but as present reality. This new creation is a free gift but not without responsibility before our heavenly Father and King. In this new life we are called to walk as children of light, discern what is pleasing to the Lord and expose unfruitful deeds of darkness.³

We affirm that our minds have been darkened in rejection of God as we have aimed to be like God by defining good things for ourselves.⁴ In Christ we are called to not be conformed to the patterns of the world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds.⁵ Therefore we reject conformity to the world’s definition of the good and affirm that the mind of Christ calls us to consider others more significant than ourselves, confident that every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.⁶

We affirm marriage between one man and one woman as a sign of God’s covenant with his Church, his faithfulness, the new creation and new

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from NRSV.

² 2 Corinthians 5:17.

³ Ephesians 5:8–11.

⁴ Romans 1:21.

⁵ Romans 12:2.

⁶ Philippians 2:2–11.

life available to all.⁷ We equally affirm the high calling of celibacy in singleness as a sign of our ultimate belonging to the family of God.

We confess that the Church has too often compromised our witness and our participation in the Kingdom of God by allowing marriage and sex to become instruments for personal fulfillment and the indulgence of lust rather than a means for the Holy Spirit to disciple men, women, and children,⁸ thus becoming captive to “philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition.”⁹

2. *Our Identity in Christ*

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God, through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:26-28

*As Jesus’ disciples, we are crucified with Christ and Christ lives through us.*¹⁰

We affirm that those who are in Christ are being transformed from confusion to clarity about their identity.¹¹ Baptized with the Holy Spirit, we are clothed in the righteousness of God. This gift of righteousness defines us empowering our mission and community as children of God.¹²

We reject that identity is self-generated or self-discovered; instead we affirm that we receive our identities through the abundant life of Christ alone.¹³ We are made by him, for him, and called to grow into his image.

We reject the practice of making penultimate things, like gender and sexual identity, fundamental. This practice is idolatry and is at the root of sin.

⁷ Revelation 19:7-8.

⁸ This references Malachi 2:15 which states God seeks ‘godly offspring’ in marriage through the work of the Holy Spirit. We believe ‘godly offspring’ refers to more than just children but all whom a marriage impacts.

⁹ Colossians 2:8.

¹⁰ Ephesians 2:20.

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 3:18.

¹² John 1:12.

¹³ John 10:10.

However, we cannot choose even these penultimate things that we are tempted to allow to define us.

We affirm that God creates us as eternal beings, physically male or female¹⁴ and our ethnicity follows us into God's kingdom.¹⁵ These physical traits are God's good gifts to us, and cannot be denied or denounced for God declared his creation "very good."¹⁶ But to define ourselves ultimately by gender or sexuality, ethnicity, politics, tribe, or treasure is a betrayal of Jesus' saving work in our lives, and a rejection of his grace and love.

We confess that we have too often loved these lesser things more than God, having dishonored him and "exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen."¹⁷

3. *Our Freedom in Christ*

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).

Colossians 3:1-5

Jesus Christ is our true liberator from counterfeit claims—of sexual freedom, of fulfillment of desire, of power and personal significance. These offer no liberty at all and only invite God's wrath.

We affirm that our freedom in Christ must change how we live, and fix our eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.¹⁸ Set free by the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ from our sin and the sins

¹⁴ Genesis 1:27. We understand that a small minority of people are born with one of many intersex conditions, which include some form of biological ambiguity, about .018% according to one study published by the National Institute of Health.

¹⁵ Daniel 7:14; Revelation 7:9-10.

¹⁶ Genesis 1:31.

¹⁷ Romans 1:25.

¹⁸ Galatians 5:13, Hebrews 12:2.

committed against us, we can live beyond carnal and material notions of identity and worldly patterns and practices of sexuality.

We affirm our accountability before God and others. This responsibility permeates every aspect of our experience, even the most personal, “for nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light.”¹⁹

We reject there are areas of our life which are not subject to Christ and the authority of his Word. The people of God are free only in Christ,²⁰ and the physical expression of our sexuality faithfully exists only in a marriage covenant between one man and one woman.²¹ We also reject that our full humanity requires the unrestricted expression of our sexuality.²² We affirm that only in Christ we may faithfully confront the affliction of disordered desires and the passions of the flesh.

We reject the idolization of gender or sexual expression that enslaves ourselves and others to finding satisfaction and worth in desire and desirability. We affirm our new and present life in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and put to death those earthly things that mire us in the old life marred by sin.²³

We confess we have allowed our love of the poor, our care for creation and our physical bodies, and even our self-understanding to be corrupted by materialism. We have made idols of the tangible--food, drink, sex, money, power, politics and personal impact and significance. All idols imprison and enslave, but we are not hopeless because “From heaven the Lord looked at the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die.”²⁴

4. Grace In Christ

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may

¹⁹ Luke 8:17, see also Matthew 12:36; Romans 14:12; Hebrew 4:13, and many others.

²⁰ Galatians 5:1.

²¹ Genesis 2:24-25.

²² Matthew 22:29-30.

²³ Colossians 3:5.

²⁴ Psalm 102:19-20.

boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Ephesians 2:8-10

Grace is God's undeserved and benevolent love toward us that calls us to show grace to one another, freeing us to live a new life as disciples of Christ and children of God.

We affirm God's covenant of grace with his children made effective by Jesus Christ,²⁵ uniting us now and forever to our heavenly Father²⁶ through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

We affirm that in Christ all things are possible²⁷ and that only God's grace creates new life in those dead in sin; because he created us, redeemed us, and calls us by name, we are his.²⁸

We reject the idea that grace allows us to continue sinning or even define ourselves by our sin. We affirm that continuing to sin after a knowledge of the truth profanes the sacrifice of Christ, inviting consuming fear and judgment.²⁹

We affirm that Christ's grace is good news that sets the captive free from sin, recovers the sight of the spiritually blind, and sets at liberty the oppressed.³⁰

We affirm that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,³¹ therefore we humble ourselves before the Lord living by his grace, refusing to speak evil of others, to make distinctions among ourselves or to become judges with evil thoughts.³²

We confess that we have seen the speck in our brother's eye while ignoring the log in our own eye and hypocritically we have not extended grace

²⁵ Luke 22:20.

²⁶ Jeremiah 31:33.

²⁷ Matthew 19:26.

²⁸ Isaiah 43:1.

²⁹ Hebrews 10:26-27.

³⁰ Luke 4:18.

³¹ Romans 3:23.

³² James 2:4, 4:11-12.

to others because we believe we have not been in need of God's gift of forgiveness ourselves.³³

We affirm the unlimited possibility of God's grace to redeem anyone, forgive any sin or repair any relationship because "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."³⁴

5. *Together With Christ*

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

Romans 12:4-5

The gospel involves the church as the people of God on the mission of God becoming the image of God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit; this is the primary work of our life and is for all whom the Lord calls.

We affirm that the Church takes its form in a band of sinful women and men among whom Jesus Christ, through no virtue of our own, forms a fellowship whose work is to proclaim the free grace of God to the world. Our presence among the company of Christ's elect supersedes but does not destroy associations with nations, races, governments, families, and tribes. Where those loyalties conflict, we must submit to Jesus Christ, who is over all things and preeminent.³⁵

We reject alliances of expediency that compromise the Gospel—be they with liberal or conservative groups. Neither will we rage powerlessly against the culture as if we are victims of a sinful world rather than victorious in Christ.³⁶

We affirm the breathtaking cultural diversity of humanity as a reflection of the Kingdom of God³⁷ and claim that we are effectively united

³³ Matthew 7:3-5.

³⁴ Lamentations 3:22-23.

³⁵ Colossians 1:15-20.

³⁶ 1 John 5:4.

³⁷ Matthew 8:11.

only as a work of the Holy Spirit who bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God and heirs of our heavenly Father the King.³⁸

We affirm that the Spirit joins together in unity and the bond of peace God's warring, and wounded children.³⁹ This astonishing unity among sinners made holy demonstrates the character of God to move the world to believe and confess Jesus Christ as Lord.⁴⁰

We reject that we are united in a holy bond of unity by anything else—be it sexual desire, political agendas, shared causes, or even common enemies. Where there is no Spirit-inspired fellowship, there is no Church and no witness.

We confess that we have sought other means to unite us and even rejected God to achieve unity and power behind sinful human leaders, making ourselves “like all the nations.”⁴¹

We affirm that the unifying power of the Holy Spirit for the Kingdom requires no fallible human mediator, priest, essential hierarchies, or distinctions. It is available to all women and men called by God who has promised, “Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”⁴²

6. *The Love of Christ*

We love because he first loved us. Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.

1 John 4:19-21

Those who are in Christ are called to love uniquely and are compelled to join Christ's mission of reconciliation in a community that produces ambassadors of Christ who love God and their neighbor as themselves.

³⁸ Romans 8:16-17.

³⁹ Ephesians 4:3-6.

⁴⁰ John 17:21.

⁴¹ 1 Samuel 8:5.

⁴² Isaiah 43:6-7.

We affirm that in love God is reconciling all things to himself.⁴³ The Church loves God and the world by making disciples, baptizing believers in the name of the Triune God and teaching obedience to God's commands.⁴⁴

We affirm there is no love that does not keep the Lord's commands and serve him as King.⁴⁵

We reject the Church serving herself by seeking approval and acceptance from a world that rejects its Maker, winning the world to our good intentions rather than proclaiming Jesus Christ and his propitiation for our sin.⁴⁶ Speaking truth in love can give the impression to the world of intolerance.

We affirm love is patient but not permissive.

We affirm love is kind but not weak.

We affirm love does not rejoice at wrongdoing but in the truth.⁴⁷

We reject the equivocation of love as something that exists apart from God. Love is not love apart from God.⁴⁸ We affirm that Jesus modeled and taught there is no greater love than laying down our life for others.⁴⁹

We reject any claim to love Jesus that does not also love our brother, sister, neighbor, or even our enemy.

We affirm that to receive and share the love of God is to grow into the measure of the fullness of the stature of Jesus Christ.⁵⁰

We confess that too often we have only loved those who have loved us, and we have rejected the wounded, the sexually broken, those unlike us, the lost and sinners—the very ones whom Jesus came to heal.⁵¹ In the love of God the glorious hope of the Kingdom that is both present and coming is revealed.

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are... What we do know is this: when he

⁴³ 2 Corinthians 5:18-19; Colossians 1:20.

⁴⁴ Matthew 28:19-20.

⁴⁵ John 14:15.

⁴⁶ 1 John 4:9-10.

⁴⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:4-6.

⁴⁸ 1 John 4:7-12.

⁴⁹ John 15:13.

⁵⁰ Ephesians 4:11-16; Philippians 3:12-14.

⁵¹ Mark 2:17.

is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.”⁵²

⁵² 1 John 3:1–3.

Part 1: Foundations

This first part of the book examines three different foundational voices that play into our theological discussions: the Bible, theology, and culture. We believe that the method of listening to each of these voices speak on their own terms allows us to integrate these voices in a coherent and fair conversation that helps us recognize where we ourselves might be influenced by each voice more than another. We believe submission to the word of God is vital, and that it is equally vital to not confuse the words of humans with the voice of God. To do this, we must discern our own thoughts as well as engaging others who disagree.

Part 1.1: Biblical Foundations

The clearest declaration of God's glory is found in His Word, both incarnate and written.... We confess that God alone is Lord of the conscience, but this freedom is for the purpose of allowing us to be subject always and primarily to God's Word. The Spirit will never prompt our conscience to conclusions that are at odds with the Scriptures that He has inspired. The revelation of the incarnate Word does not minimize, qualify, or set aside the authority of the written Word. We are happy to confess ourselves captive to the Word of God, not just individually, but also as members of a community of faith, extending through time and around the globe.

ECO *Essential Tenets* I.

Chapter 1

Beginning with the End in Mind—An Approach to Scripture

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr and Dr. Meredith Riedel

This team has adopted an approach to reading Scripture that focuses on Jesus and the direction Jesus points toward in his understanding of the Kingdom of God, as further clarified by Paul and other New Testament writers when they describe the resurrection and new creation. This is an eschatological approach to Scripture that is sometimes at odds with common proof-texting.

Common Christian discussions of gender and sexuality tend to look to Genesis and other texts that speak to the creation of the human species first, in order to establish an ideal portrayal of human biological and social life. And while Genesis is vital to our understanding of theological anthropology, the reality is, the Bible does not portray itself as a “manual” to live life properly. Nor does Genesis itself portray the garden of Eden as an idealized situation representative of all humanity.¹ After Genesis 1, the rest of Genesis is a story of election and the relationship between the people of God (line of Seth) and the nations (line of Cain). The genre of the Bible is not a moral handbook for right living, it is a story of God’s relationship to his people who are taken out of the world to be formed and sent into the world as his ambassadors. Thus, behavioral standards of the Bible are never *expected* of the *goyim* (“nations”) but of those who image God, who represent him in his character. The nations behave in rebellious ways, openly flouting the law of God and choosing harmful behaviors. Sin, as we’ll see in chapter 4, is quite clearly shown in Genesis 4:7 (its first occurrence in the Bible), as a power that dominates the rebels, and this is why the nations behave as they do. They obey the wrong master. The call of God’s people is not moral perfection for its own sake, or

¹ For example, Genesis implies that there were other people outside of Eden, which itself was a walled garden (3:24). Adam was not created in the garden, but taken from a dusty, waterless land (2:5-7) to which he was later exiled (3:19). Whom does Cain fear will attack him (4:14-15)? The clear implication is that Adam in Eden is itself a model of *election* of the people of God, not the creation of the father of all humanity as a whole.

because that's what we were created for, but formation into the character of God so that the power of the evil one can be overcome with the power of good.²

To understand the Christian Bible rightly, then, is to understand that it largely describes a history of God at work with and through people, forming them into his image, growing up in every way into Jesus.³ In terms of gender and sexuality, this of course presents some stark challenges. Jesus was unmarried, uninvolved in sexual relations, and taught that there was no marriage in the resurrection. This fact alone means that, if Jesus is the ideal, rather than attempting to become “more fully human” the aim is to become more like Christ. In a world that did not distinguish between gender roles and biological sex, Jesus's intentionally unmarried state upends our attempts to find a species-based cultural norm that the church teaches the world. Jesus doesn't teach his disciples to be *human*, but to be *godly*. Now, that is a far cry from condemning sex, marriage, and gender identities as might have been done by those with an overrealized eschatology—like the Shakers who renounced sex and marriage—but it is also a far cry from using the Bible to preach specific gender stereotypes and roles. The aim of the Bible is not to “get back to the Garden” through rediscovery of liberated or properly ordered sex. The aim is to “present everyone mature in Christ.”⁴

Thus, our approach to Scripture begins with this hermeneutic, which itself transforms the very nature of the discussion, we believe, in a more biblically valid direction. Thus, we will be arguing that human sex, sexual relationships, and gender identities and roles must be understood first in light of kingdom maturity which then makes the goods of life in the “present evil age” penultimate, secondary, provisional, shadowy.

This does not mean that gender identity, gender roles, sex, marriage, reproduction, or any of the other conversations implied by this conversation are *bad* or *not good*. Rather, they are not-yet-mature. Paul describes gender equality in Galatians 3:28 in just this coming-of-age way. In context, Paul is discussing the pedagogical role of the law and human customs. They aim at producing maturity. If we get stuck litigating dos and don'ts we've missed the point. So, in Christ, there is neither male nor female, neither Jew nor Greek,

² Cf. Rom 12:21.

³ Eph 4:15.

⁴ Col 1:28.

neither slave nor free. That doesn't mean these differences are unreal or effaced. Paul thinks being a Jew still conveys much value,⁵ so we should imagine that being a man or woman still has value, as does the enjoyment of the "wife of your youth" as the wisdom literature describes.⁶ The realities of hierarchy that are highly formative, as between those of master and slave in the ancient world, or of poverty and wealth today (which we will discuss), each present their own kinds of goods and evils, which will also pass away in the kingdom of God where wealth has no value and the last are first and the first last.⁷ The kingdom of God upsets human cultural values of ethnicity, gender, and economics and redirects them. It is our responsibility to live in light of the coming kingdom and in our relationships live toward that kingdom by bringing good news to the poor and freeing captives.⁸

Maturity, then, is where we are headed in this discussion, and we believe that our call is to represent this "new creation" by being mature ambassadors of the gospel of reconciliation, that in Christ, God is reconciling all things to himself.⁹ Gender and sex are part of this ministry of reconciliation.

Throughout this book we approach Scripture in light of our Reformed tradition. We acknowledge its authority over us as individual Christians and over the whole church of God's people. But interpretation is not an exact science, it is a human art. As such, we are aware that cultural context informed the writers of the Bible and the themes they covered, as well as the context of ourselves as readers. If we do not study ourselves and the cultural influences on us, as well as the voices of the culture to which we are called as ambassadors, we run the risk of using a truncated or malformed version of the gospel to justify "us" as a group rather than returning to the justification that God gives through Christ alone. God is not on "our" side. God is for us in Jesus Christ, not in any cultural battle we find ourselves within.

⁵ Rom 3:1-2.

⁶ Cf. Prov 5:18; Song of Songs; Eccl 9:9.

⁷ Mt 20:16; Mk 9:35, 10:31; Lk 13:30.

⁸ Lk 4:18.

⁹ 2 Cor 5:17-20. Note that the word translated "ambassadors" is *πρεσβεύομεν*, a verb with its root in the same frame as "elder". In other words, ambassadors are the mature representatives.

This means that we aim to use Scripture throughout this book as peacemakers, as befits the children of God,¹⁰ not as judges who justify some and condemn others.¹¹

Nevertheless, there are those who, with scholarly acumen, will argue for a Christian position affirming LGBT identities as created by God and thus valid. These arguments typically come from subjective experience as in the following quote:

I think it important to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and *appeal instead to another authority* when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. And what exactly is that authority? We *appeal explicitly to the weight of our own experience* and the experience thousands of others have witnessed to, which tells us that to claim our own sexual orientation is in fact to accept the way in which God has created us. By so doing, we *explicitly reject as well the premises of the scriptural statements* condemning homosexuality – namely, that it is a vice freely chosen, a symptom of human corruption, and disobedience to God’s created order.¹²

We will find that this represents a growing perspective that views LGBT identity as a valid kind of human diversity. Chapter 13 in this book examines these different approaches. Yet it is from the realm of human cultural experience that the Bible’s authority is explicitly rejected, without a conversation about what is forming modern human experience. It is a logical error to move from human experience in a specific context to a universal truth about human nature. But even then, we are advocating for a way of reading the Bible that doesn’t justify human nature, but justification in Christ regardless of our nature that leads us away from celebrations of humanity and toward celebrations of the kingdom of God. We are confident that it is only in the kingdom of God that human maturity is revealed, and not in the understanding that our people in our time have finally arrived at a better understanding of “what it means to be human” than our ancestors or people of different cultures. Only in this way can we have the humility that allows us

¹⁰ Mt 5:9.

¹¹ Cf. Mt 7:1-3; Lk 6:37; Rom 2:1.

¹² Luke Timothy Johnson, “Homosexuality & the Church | Commonweal Magazine,” June 11, 2007, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/homosexuality-church-0>. Emphasis added.

to be condemned by Scripture and thereby transformed as we are not conformed to the world, but transformed by the renewing of our minds.¹³

¹³ Rom 12:2.

Chapter 2

A Biblical Theology of the (Sexed) Body

Rev. Emily Hamilton

To ask questions about gender and sexuality is, in large part, to ask questions about *embodiment* and what our bodies are *for*. Therefore, a robust theology of the body offers us useful scaffolding from which we can construct a faithful vision of gender and sex more broadly. The biblical narrative, from creation to new creation, affirms that our bodies (in particular, our *sexed* bodies) are *good*. They are not messy aberrations or provisional concessions of a temporal materiality. Instead, the Christian story tells us that our bodies are sites of God’s redemptive activity in the world; bodies are where discipleship happens. This essay will examine what we learn about a Christian vision of the goodness of our *sexed* bodies through four grand arcs of salvation history: creation, rebellion, redemption, and new creation.¹

Act 1: Creation

In Genesis 1:27 we read that God created humanity in his own image, “male and female God created them.”² Greg Wagenfuhr, in his essay, “The Image of God and the Only Begotten,” found in this committee’s resource, *Life*, encourages us to be appropriately tentative about what we make of image of God language at this point in Scripture; at the same time, I am drawn to the work of biblical scholar Carmen Joy Imes, who, against functionalist readings of *imago* language, argues that our concrete embodiment, merely in its very existence, is a thing that represents God to the rest of creation in the cosmic

¹ Various theologians and biblical scholars use the metaphor of a multi-act play to describe the biblical story. Sometimes this is three acts, four acts, or more. For the purposes of this essay, four work well, but other schemas are helpful. See also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2005); Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024); NT Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: HarperOne, 2013).

² NIV.

temple.³ And for Genesis, this representation happens in a binary, *egalitarian* embodiment: males *and* females are both image-bearers without hierarchy. This differentiated embodiment as created by God is *good*. Women do not have to become men to be image-bearers; men do not have to become women to be image-bearers.⁴ Our sexed bodies are created goods, not something from which we need to escape.⁵

Interlude

At this point, the Protestant Reformed perspective tends to diverge from our Catholic siblings, not so much around a theology of gender, but in how much we can *know* about the purpose (*telos*) of our sexed bodies from creation alone. Whereas the Catholic tradition affirms *nature* as a source of revelation from which we can understand God's purposes, the Protestant tradition, especially the Reformed tradition, has tended to hold that, due to sin, our ability to accurately divine God's creative intent for our nature is severely compromised.⁶ This doesn't mean that creation has nothing constructive to say about our identities as male and female embodied creatures. However, because of what comes next in Act 2, it means that, often, that we cannot "run a full theology of bodies and gender from creation alone."⁷

³ See GP Wagenfuhr, "Christian Orthodox Foundations," in *Life: Theology and Resources* (Goleta, CA: ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians, 2023), 36.; Carmen Joy Imes, *Being God's Image: Why Creation Still Matters*, IVP Academic, June 2023.

⁴ While this might seem obvious, at times, the church has, at times, had more in common with Gnostic heresies that treat women's bodies, in particular, as a "special problem" to be solved by becoming less female. See Beth Felker Jones, "Embodied From Creation Through Redemption: Placing Gender and Sexuality in Theological Context," The Center for Pastor Theologians, October 25, 2016, <https://www.pastortheologians.com/media/jones2016>.

⁵ Felli Do Vale, *Gender As Love: A Theological Account of Human Identity, Embodied Desire, and Our Social Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 179.

⁶ For a Catholic perspective that says a bit more about God's intention for human nature as male and female on the basis of creation, see Abigail Rine Favale, *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2022). For a Protestant perspective that counters this emphasis on creation through engaging more with the reality of *fallen* human nature and eschatology, see Do Vale, *Gender As Love*. Do Vale writes, "Creation is invoked without recognition of the ways it has been distorted by sin and without seeing eschatology as a surplus to it." (181)

⁷ Jones, "Beth Felker Jones | Embodied From Creation Through Redemption."

Act 2: Rebellion

We do not journey far into the biblical narrative before a colossal x-factor enters the picture: sin. Under the dominion of sin, to which we are all presently subject, it is hard to know and describe the goodness of our sexed bodies and what they are for. It is difficult to precisely name the goods of maleness and femaleness because sin has disrupted our ability to know and live them. Often, when the Christian tradition has underplayed the significance of sin's disruptive and enslaving nature, we have deceived ourselves, baptizing our cultural expressions of gender as normative in ways that actually stand in tension with our discipleship (such as men who feel they cannot show emotion or women who shrink back from leadership).⁸ At worst, we use those cultural expressions as justification for hierarchy and violence. Not all of our expressions of gender may be sinful, but that does not mean we should interpret them as "natural" and bully those who do not conform.⁹ Also, we cannot simply observe sex in our bodies and make universal conclusions about its essence. Moves like "maleness is about initiating and giving life" and "femaleness is about gracious receptivity" (based on observations about how sex organs work in reproduction) tend to reinforce harmful and sinful mandates and stereotypes of men as "leaders" and women as "followers." Because of sin's distorting effects, we need more than just a short account of creation for making sense of living faithfully as sexually differentiated embodied creatures.

Act 3: Redemption

But God, "being in rich in mercy," has not left us hermetically sealed off in our sins, unable to access knowledge about his good creative purposes.¹⁰ In Christ, the Word-made-flesh, God's intention for humanity is ultimately

⁸ Beth Felker Jones, *Faithful: A Theology of Sex*, Ordinary Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 30–33. ". . . many of these socially constructed ways of being male and female are, in fact, sinful distortions of maleness and femaleness. . . . Some things about masculinity and femininity are sheer artifice, and some things about masculinity and femininity are downright harmful to the beloved children of God. But that doesn't stop maleness and femaleness from being created goods. Male bodies are good. Female bodies are good. God made them and God loves them."

⁹ Jones, "Beth Felker Jones | Embodied From Creation Through Redemption."

¹⁰ Ephesians 2:4.

revealed and fulfilled in a savior who assumes our full humanity, including a sexed body, in order that we may be healed.¹¹

God did not send an embodied savior that was some improvement on his original design, transcendent beyond sex; Jesus is not the human equivalent of an iPhone upgrade. Jesus is male; he was circumcised on the eighth day.¹² At the same time, Jesus embodied (and still embodies) a maleness that subverted and exposed our fallen, worldly conceptions of sex and gender while reordering the created goodness of our maleness and femaleness toward the ends of love and revealing the kingdom of God. He did all of this while remaining single and celibate, having no biological children, befriending and empowering women, and refusing to take up arms against his enemies despite their violence against him—all behaviors that defied traditional expressions of masculinity in his time, and often in our time as well.¹³ Jesus reveals that we do not have to transcend our sexed bodies in order to challenge gender stereotypes at odds with our discipleship; rather, he is redeeming us from within our embodied existence.

Not only does Christ assume our sexed human nature in birth, life, and death; he is also raised with it. We see in his resurrection a kind of continuity and transformation. Jesus eats food in his resurrected flesh and walks on resurrected feet; yet he's not always recognizable and moves through locked doors.¹⁴ Noticeably, he body bears marks of his earlier wounds, scars from his death now transformed into a "monument of death's defeat."¹⁵

Act 4: New Creation

Because Christ assumes our humanity and is raised with it, the Christian tradition from the New Testament onward, has taken this to mean something significant for the future of our bodies as well. The resurrection of

¹¹ Nazianzus says, "For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved. Gregory Nazianzus, "Letters on the Apollinarian Controversy," New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia, accessed January 8, 2025, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3103a.htm>.

¹² Luke 2:21.

¹³ Brittany E. Wilson, *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Luke 25:13-35; John 20:19; John 21.

¹⁵ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, chapter 4, paragraph 24.

Christ is God's great big "yes!" to the creation he lovingly made to begin with, the firstfruits of our own resurrection to come.¹⁶ God is committed to the redemption of our bodies.¹⁷

In terms of how sex and gender will be experienced in our future resurrected bodies, the Church has affirmed, historically, one of two options. In the first option, our genders are a temporary, provisional reality, confined to the act of either creation or fall, but they will not continue on into the eschaton.¹⁸ We will be raised as humans, but not with the messy, material elements of sex and gender. The Eastern tradition has typically held this view.

In the second option, typically held by the Western tradition, the sexedness of our bodies is a part of God's good creation that will be redeemed and restored in light of the resurrection. Saint Augustine was one of the earliest proponents of this perspective. In *City of God*, addressing interlocutors who assume that women surely will be resurrected as men, Augustine writes, "...both sexes shall rise...the sex of a woman is not a vice, but nature...He, then, who created both sexes will restore both."¹⁹ In other words, there is continuity between creation and new creation, and our sexed bodies are not themselves sinful, even if they groan in present bondage. For Augustine, *sin* is the problem, not our bodies. As Beth Felker Jones says, commenting on Augustine, "God saves us, not some other creature all together."²⁰ Similarly, do Vale concludes

Individuals receive the gift of Christ *as* women and men, and grace does not require the erasure of natural human traits with which God created them. But grace also *redeems* and *perfects* these traits, no longer allowing them to possess the importance they currently hold in classifying human beings and their worth. At the consummation of Christ's work, humanity *is* gendered, but gender no longer serves as a metric with which to measure the worth, esteem, or quality of a person. In addition, those for whom gender identity is complicated, a cause for shame, or a vessel for memories that are painful, will know what it means to have the evils they have experienced defeated.²¹

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:20.

¹⁷ Romans 8:11.

¹⁸ Jones, "Beth Felker Jones | Embodied From Creation Through Redemption."

¹⁹ Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), bk. 22 ch 17.

²⁰ Jones, "Beth Felker Jones | Embodied From Creation Through Redemption."

²¹ Do Vale, *Gender As Love*, 231–32.

We must learn to approach questions of gender and sexuality from within the grand arc of the biblical narrative, carefully accounting for how the goodness of creation (Act 1), the reality of sin (Act 2), the revelation of Jesus Christ (Act 3), and the hope for restoration (Act 3) ought to guide our approach. Below are a few suggested, although not comprehensive, implications of this narrative approach.

We ought to reject ideologies of gender and sexuality that fall into hierarchical dualism: To be a human is to be an embodied creature. We are not *merely* bodies, but our bodies are part of an integrated whole of who we are. Hierarchical dualism would suggest that one's "true self" is some immaterial part of us, separate from our physical being, waiting to be set free from the outer husk of temporal flesh. This kind of hierarchical dualism often asserts that the immaterial part of us is good, sacred, and "real" while the material part of us is bad, profane, or a thing from which we need release. Despite its popularity at various times throughout Christian history, this is not a Christian way of thinking about bodies; it has more in common with Gnostic heresies that the early church rejected precisely because that philosophy devalued the body and the physical world in ways that compromised the underpinnings of Christian salvation.²² We ought to be cautious about ideologies that would say there is some "real essential self" within us separate from an embodied reality, not so much because those ideologies undermine cultural gender constructs, but because often those ideologies devalue the sexed body as *good*.²³

We ought not be surprised that, under the rule of sin, some people experience their sexed bodies as painful and burdensome. Felipe do Vale writes, "For so many, the call to love one's enemy does not require traveling very far, for their nearest enemy looks back at them in the mirror."²⁴ Hierarchical dualism is not necessarily a set of principles we believe; it can feel painfully inscribed into our very experience of embodiment. At the same time,

²² Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 101.

²³ Beth Felker Jones takes this a step further: "This is the fundamental reason that I don't buy arguments that would do away with so-called 'binary sexuality'—the understanding that humans exist in two sexes, male and female. . . . Moves to ignore maleness and femaleness as created goods are so often moves to denigrate the female." Jones, *Faithful*, 33.

²⁴ Do Vale, *Gender As Love*, 176.

we have reason to hope that, in Christ, those who feel hatred towards their bodies will also see their own scars become transfigured in the same manner as Christ's own: testimonies to death's defeat.

Any discussions of “true masculinity” and “true femininity” need to be Christologically normed. We do not need to slough off all forms of gendered expression; we cannot transcend our sexedness. But we need to seek forms of gender expression that are oriented towards the aims of discipleship and cultivating fruits of the Spirit. The call to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus comes to men *and* women; we have way more in *common* in following Jesus than we have different. Our telos is not to become “true men” and “true women” but to become disciples, men and women, living out our gendered identities in ways that honor and reflect Christ.

Chapter 3

Commonly Referenced and Disputed Texts

Dr. Meredith Riedel

Seven passages in the Bible are remarkably clear in condemning certain types of sexuality but require careful exegesis and wise interpretation in order to uphold the gospel of grace and avoid conflict with Christ's commandment to love.¹ Three of these are found in the Old Testament and four in the New Testament: Genesis 1-2; Genesis 19:1-38; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Romans 1:25-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:9-10 and Jude 6-7. These are the most unequivocal, though not the only passages in the Bible that condemn sexual immorality.

These pericopes are unquestionably clear, yet their use as a weapon of condemnation goes against the commands of Jesus and Paul to not condemn. Handling these scriptures well is something every pastor, elder, and church leader should learn. However, before going through these passages and their interpretations, it is wise to say a word about our approach to interpreting them, guided by relevant theological documents adopted by ECO.²

Overview of the Contested Passages

These commonly disputed verses and proof-texts—Genesis 1-2; Genesis 19:1-38; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Romans 1:25-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:9-10 and Jude 6-7—each condemn homosexual behavior in unequivocal terms. Other biblical passages do refer to larger understandings of sexual immorality.

When discussing these passages with others, it is wise especially for church leaders to know how they have been misused, so that they can be discussed confidently and faithfully.

¹ These passages are sometimes referred to as “clobber passages” used as prooftexts to condemn people.

² The most relevant of ECO's Confessional Standards for this essay are the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Standards.

Genesis 1-2

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (1:27-28 NRSV)

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.” And out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all the livestock, and to the birds of the sky, and to every animal of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. And the Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which he had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

“At last this is bone of my bones,

And flesh of my flesh;

She shall be called ‘woman,’

Because she was taken out of man.” For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, but they were not ashamed. (2:18-25)

This is the book of the generations of Adam. On the day when God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female, and he blessed them and named them “mankind” on the day when they were created. (5:1-2)

Gen 1:27 (“male and female”) is not controversial because the Hebrew words denote biological differences. There is nothing in this scripture to identify social roles. Moreover, the so-called cultural mandate (“have dominion” in Gen. 1:28), which does indicate social function, is a statement of endorsement, not limitation. In other words, it does not specify assigned gender roles but rather the mission of human beings together in community.

Some might think that Genesis 2:18, 20 specify gender roles or functions given the use of the Hebrew word for “helper” (*ezer*). This word is

one that is most often applied elsewhere in the Bible only to God.³ Its use in Genesis from the mouth of God indicates not a subordinate or auxiliary role for women, but rather gives women the dignity of powerful partnership. When the idea of being a helper in fruitfulness is misunderstood, this notion (especially by English-speaking interpreters) can reduce women to wombs, negate any value for women who for whatever reason cannot reproduce and excludes the fact that childless couples can find fulfillment and blessing as God's obedient people. Marriage and childbearing can be great blessings, but they are not the only markers of life abundant. Jesus never married and never had children. Paul states in 1 Corinthians 7:8 both that it is better to remain unmarried, as he is, and that the Corinthians would do well to imitate him.

These early chapters of Genesis, despite frequently being appealed to by Christians who engage in conversations about gender and sexuality, do not shed sufficient light on modern controversies about social function or gender roles if they are used as simple proof-texts. In developing a larger biblical theology of gender and sex, these passages can be very useful as explorations of the Bible's understanding of what is created and what is developed by human culture.

Genesis 19:1-38 (Sodom and Gomorrah)⁴

They called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them." Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, "No, my friends. Don't do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof."

"Get out of our way," they replied. "This fellow came here as a foreigner, and now he wants to play the judge! We'll treat you worse than them." They

³ Hebrew: *ezer*. This word appears 21 times in the OT: twice in Genesis for the woman (Genesis 2:18, 20), three times for nations to whom Israel appealed for military aid (Isaiah 30:5; Ezekiel 12:14; Daniel 11:34), and 16 times for God as Israel's helper (Exodus 18:4; Deuteronomy 33:7, 26, 29; Psalms 20:2; 33:20; 70:5; 89:19 [translated "strength" in the NIV]; 115:9, 10, 11; 121:1 – 2; 124:8; 146:5; Hosea 13:9).

⁴ Relevant verses are Gen 19:5-9; the rest is about how the angels rescued Lot's family.

kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door.
(Gen 19:5-9)

This episode in the Hebrew Bible is very well known, and can seem morally ambiguous to a 21st-century reader. The visitors are angels, not merely humans, yet the men of Sodom wanted to have sex with them. Lot offers his virgin (possibly engaged) daughters to them instead, but they refuse the offer to have sex with women. Moreover, they become violent to the point where the angels tell Lot and his family to flee immediately, “because the LORD is about to destroy the city!” (Gen 19:14) Later we learn that the destruction included the two cities of Sodom and Gomorrah “and the entire plain, including all those living in the cities – and also the vegetation in the land.” (Gen 19:25) And Lot’s wife also died, just for looking back. (Gen 19:26) This was a literal scorched-earth attack by God, even on the city of Gomorrah, which wasn’t even where Lot lived.

So, the material question here seems to be, why was Sodom destroyed? Already in Genesis 13:13⁵ and 18:20,⁶ the wickedness of Sodom was known to be its defining characteristic, even before Lot moved there. This wickedness was not merely sexual sin. Throughout the Bible, sexual immorality is regularly linked as one particularly notable symptom among many of those who reject God.

In the latter half of Gen 18 is the story of Abraham’s negotiation with God over the fate of Sodom. This conversation is not an example of God changing his mind about whether to destroy a city based on Abraham’s haggling. It is God saying only yes to Abraham, who was pleading for mercy on a city that had not even ten righteous people in it. (cf. Gen 18:32). In other words, there wasn’t even ten righteous people there. It was wholly corrupt, and everyone was implicated.

Sodom’s sin therefore cannot be reduced to a single transgression, whether sexual sin or a mere lack of hospitality.⁷ This latter interpretation is

⁵ Now the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord. (Gen 13:13)

⁶ Then the Lord said, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.” (Gen 18:20-21)

⁷ Bailey 1955, Nelson 1978, McNeill 1993, Boswell 2005, McNeill 2008, etc.

very popular among exegetes committed to avoiding the condemnation of sexual sin in this passage. This interpretation doesn't hold water.

Later references to Sodom in the Hebrew Bible reveal that the city's reputation for sin was thoroughgoing and diverse, not limited to a single type of sin or a single transgression.⁸ Indeed, the scripture is careful to specify that "all the men from every part of the city – both young and old – surrounded the house" to demand sex with Lot's guests. (Gen 19:4) This is in keeping with the passage immediately previous where Abraham sought to save Sodom for the sake of the few righteous ones; the problem in the end is that there were none righteous, not one, and not ten.⁹ *All* the men from *everywhere* in the city, of *every* age surrounded Lot's house.

Moreover, the idea that the men of Sodom were guilty merely of inhospitality makes no sense since they wanted not only to have sex with Lot's guests, but threatened to "treat [him] worse than them" because Lot also was seen as a foreigner in Sodom. (Gen 19:9) In order to accept that a violation of the cultural imperative of eastern hospitality was at issue here, one must accept that the specific threats and desires of the men of Sodom were themselves wrong. Moreover, they *themselves* did not consider that they were breaking their own hospitality custom because they were following Canaanite practices of raping visiting foreigners, a code that is seen also in a similar episode in Judges 19 at Gibeah. Rape is more about power than sex, but in Gen 19, it's not just about rape alone, it's about homosexual rape in particular. The wickedness of Sodom was not exclusively their sexual sin, but according to later mentions of the city, also its materialism, pride, greed, and lack of concern for any of these sins. Nonetheless, sexual sin cannot be excluded as characteristic of Sodom's reputation for conspicuous wickedness.

Later Jewish texts reveal a conviction that homosexuality, while openly practiced in Greco-Roman culture, was a sin for those who follow the God of

⁸ Isa 1:10 (total destruction is proportional to degree of sinfulness), 3:9 (sinfulness was shameless); Jer 23:14 (great sin multiplies without repentance); Ezek 16:48-50 (Sodom's sins included pride, gluttony, material excess, hardheartedness toward the poor and "abominable things").

⁹ As previously mentioned, this conversation between Abraham and God has often been characterized as a negotiation, but a careful reading will show that God only ever says yes to Abraham. It is not an example of God begrudging mercy, nor of Abraham wheedling, but of God's grace and gentleness.

the Hebrews.¹⁰ Christian interpretation of this passage shows that the early church also understood (at least part) of Sodom's sin to be sexual.¹¹ In the New Testament, 2 Peter mentions the rescue of Lot, "a righteous man, who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless." (2 Peter 2:7) In this verse, and in the mention of Sodom and Gomorrah in Jude, the vocabulary is explicit about the nature of the sin condemned by God was sexual.¹² Taken together, a faithful understanding of scripture cannot avoid the teaching of homosexuality as a sin condemned by a holy God in the Hebrew Bible.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

You must not have sexual relations with a male as one has sexual relations with a woman; it is a detestable act. (18:22 NET)

If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. (20:13, NIV)

These verses are remarkably clear in their prohibition of male homosexuality. In Lev 18, the word here translated as "a detestable act" and in other translations as "an abomination" is a Hebrew word that is applied in scripture to things that God disapproves. The chapter lists primarily sexual sins like adultery and incest, in addition to homosexuality, bestiality, and child

¹⁰ Such comments are found in apocryphal texts like the *Wisdom of Solomon*, *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, the *Jewish Apocalypse of Abraham*, and the *Letter of Aristeas*, as well as in writings by Philo of Alexandria, pseudepigrapha like the *Sybilline Oracles*, and Jewish law collections like the Mishnah and Tosefta, the Babylonian Talmud, and rabbinic midrash. Cf. S. Donald Fortson, *Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition* (Nashville: B&H, 2016), chap. 12.

¹¹ One highly influential writer who claims that Sodom is never mentioned in the NT in connection with homosexuality is Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1995), 100. His work has been cited in later publications and his exegetical theory is often seen as a fact, despite evidence to the contrary in 2 Peter 2:6-7 and Jude 7.

¹² And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire. (Jude 6-7)

sacrifice. The justification for these decrees is announced in the opening verses¹³ and echoed in the closing verses with more detail.¹⁴ God says that the reason for prohibiting these practices is that they cause defilement unacceptable to God.

Sidebar: the word “abomination” [*to‘evah*, Heb. תועבה] occurs 16 times in Deuteronomy and 43 times in Ezekiel. In the Torah, refers to a number of things disapproved by God, including food prohibitions (Deut. 14:3), idolatrous practices (Deut. 12:31; 13:15), magic (Deut. 18:12) homosexuality (Lev. 18:22), cross-dressing (Deut 22:5), and ethical wrongs (Deut. 25:14–16). Ezekiel uses *to‘evah* as a generic term for all aberrations detestable to God, including purely ethical offenses. However, he also uses it to refer specifically to sexual sin as well. (Ezek 18:10-13; 22:11; 33:26) The word also occurs 21 times in Proverbs, which uses it in an exclusively ethical and universal sense, never in the context of ritual practice. In Prov 6:16-19,¹⁵ we find a list of things considered to be an abomination by God, but sexual sin is not among them. The point is, many things are detestable to God, and homosexuality is one among many. Nevertheless, the LXX translates this Hebrew word with the Greek βδέλυγμα, which is how Revelation 17:4-5 characterizes the whore of Babylon, along with lists in Rev 21:27 and 22:15. All this begs a question as to what the shared logic of an abomination is. What makes something detestable to God?

¹³ You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God. Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD. (Lev 18:3-5)

¹⁴ Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled... Everyone who does any of these detestable things – such persons must be cut off from their people. Keep my requirements and do not follow any of the detestable customs that were practiced before you came and do not defile yourselves with them. I am the LORD your God. (Lev 18:24, 29-30)

¹⁵ There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community. (Prov 6:16-19, NIV)

The need for a logical coherence is highlighted in Lev 20 where the prohibition against homosexuality (v. 13) is found in a longer list of activities forbidden to the Israelites, including sacrificing children to a false god (vv. 1-5), consulting or becoming mediums and spiritists (condemned at the beginning and end of the chapter in vv. 6 and 27), cursing parents (v. 9) incest (vv. 11, 12, 17, 19-21), adultery (v. 10), bestiality (vv. 15-16), and sex during menstruation (v 18).

The reason for these prohibitions is found in Lev 18: 7-8¹⁶ and 23¹⁷: God's people must be holy, which means consecrated to God, following God and upholding conduct according to God's law, not according to the cultural practices of pagan cultures that do not worship God. The penalties for violating these decrees are either being cut off from God's people (vv. 5, 6, 18), or being put to death (vv. 9-16, 27). For a man who sleeps with an aunt or marries a brother's wife, the penalty is childlessness (vv. 20-21). Sexual sin requires the penalty of death as a means of purifying the Israelite people to make them holy, consecrated to a holy God, and therefore distinguishable from the nations whose customs are abhorrent to a holy God.

Some interpreters have claimed that these are cultic purity laws, and therefore about what makes one ceremonially unclean or impure, not about sin.¹⁸ However, this claim makes little sense given that the purity laws and the rituals for cleansing oneself ceremonially are found elsewhere in Leviticus (chapters 11-15). Moreover, while not all impure things are sinful, all sinful things make one impure.¹⁹ Furthermore, Leviticus 20 offers no such cleansing rituals, but rather specific punishments are attached to each sin on the list, and all the punishments are permanent under Israelite law. Thus, these condemned behaviors are not presented as temporary issues that can be remedied by ritual to cleanse impurity.

These verses in Leviticus have also been interpreted as applying only to male homosexuality, and not to lesbianism. While cultural discussions of

¹⁶ Consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am the Lord your God. Keep my decrees and follow them. I am the Lord, who makes you holy. (Lev 20:7-8)

¹⁷ You must not live according to the customs of the nations I am going to drive out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them. (Lev 20:23, NIV)

¹⁸ Letha Scanzoni and Virginia R. Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor? A Positive Christian Response*, Revised (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

¹⁹ Cf. 1 Tim 5:22; Eph 5:5.

female-female sexuality are very rare in the ancient world, to argue that Leviticus somehow condones it by its silence here misses the point of what its author is arguing. Therefore, these verses in Leviticus, despite using only male vocabulary, do not exempt women from obeying them. Perhaps the clearest evidence of this is the inclusion of women in the same prohibition in the well-known passage from Romans 1.²⁰

Sidebar: Paul and the other NT writers employ the OT law as a resource for identifying sin, and therefore a kind of moral guide to reading the OT.²¹ The law has no power in itself (cf. Rom 3:19-20) but sin is a power that inexorably holds sway over every human being (Rom 3:9-12). However, the law functions as a moral compass for Christians in that the guiding principle for obedience is love (Rom 13:8-10). The law has not lost its validity after Christ (Matt 5:17-18), and indeed Paul affirms it to be holy, just and good (Rom 7:12). The only way to obey the law or to fulfill it through love is by the power of Christ's indwelling Spirit (Acts 1:8; 2 Tim 1:6, 14; Eph 3:16). In other words, knowing the exegesis of biblical sexual ethics in no way gives Christians permission to speak or act in any way that violates the commandment to love others, especially sinners. (more on this in part 3 of this book)

Romans 1:25-27

They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

On its face, this passage observes that homosexuality (for both men and women) is first, shameful; second, unnatural; and third, an activity that incurs a penalty because it is an error. The error is exchanging the truth of God for a

²⁰ Cf. Rom 1:26—Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones.

²¹ James Thompson, *Moral Formation According to Paul: The Context and Coherence of Pauline Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

lie, a concept that occurs elsewhere in both the OT²² and the NT.²³ That is a lot packed into just three verses.

The Greek word here for “unnatural” is the phrase *para physin* or “against nature,” set in distinction to “natural” or *kata physin* used earlier in the same verse. This word *physis* in Greek literature up to the time of Paul denoted “nature” and the phrase *para physin* meant “against nature” or “unnatural.”²⁴ It has been argued that this use of the word in Paul is not about what is natural but about what is conventional, so that Paul’s injunction here is about practicing something out of the ordinary; in other words it is not a condemnation of homosexual sex between homosexuals (i.e., something natural to them), but against heterosexuals who engage in homosexual sex (i.e., something unnatural).²⁵ These arguments thus appear to claim that sexual behavior is one or the other with a clear and obvious delineation that ties sexual activity to identity, but this is not consistent with any human culture in history. Nor is it consonant with the reality of Paul’s sexual ethics anywhere in Scripture.²⁶

Proponents of the “conventional vs natural” interpretation use other NT scriptures—Rom 11:24 and 1 Cor 11:14-15—to interpret Romans 1. However, the argument from Rom 11:24, which describes the ingrafting of non-Jews as wild olive tree branches into the cultivated olive tree of God’s people, the Jews, is not about sexuality nor sexual identity. The idea that the difference between non-Jews and Jews is thus merely convention is not convincing, because the metaphor of wild tree branches grafted *para physin*

²² Numerous passages assume the connection between idolatry and immorality, particularly of a sexual kind, which is why it is often linked to “whoring” language. This was also the case because of the nature of some idols in particular, like Asherah. Cf e.g. Ex 34:15-16; Ps 106:34-39; Jer 2-3; Ezek 16, 23; Hosea.

²³ Cf. Eph 4:18-19 - They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

²⁴ For a list of Greek writings and authors that includes Plato, Aristotle, Epictetus, Plutarch, and a list of Jewish writers as well cf. Fortson, *Unchanging Witness*, 328–37.

²⁵ Jack Bartlett Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*, Rev. and expanded ed (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 76–78; Dan Otto Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon, eds., *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 15.

²⁶ See chapters 7 and 8 in this volume for more on sexual ethics, marriage, and singleness.

into a cultivated tree is clearly not highlighting mere conventional cultural practice, but a statement about ontological reality and innate difference. The inclusion of non-Jews into the Christian church was a complex and sophisticated theological problem that required a full church council to resolve.²⁷

In the case of 1 Cor 11:14-15, Preston Sprinkle argues that Paul is more interested here in hair as a head covering, not making ontological statements about whether men can grow long hair (which they obviously can).²⁸ Fortson and Grams argue that the use of *para physin* to mean mere convention is not consistent with the primary source evidence of contemporary Greek literature, which was perfectly capable of expressing the difference between convention and nature.²⁹

Some scholars have also interpreted Romans 1:24-28 to mean that pederasty is wrong,³⁰ or that it does not condemn homosexuality categorically. They claim by an argument of silence that Paul therefore approves of consensual adult monogamous homosexual relationships.³¹ However much some might wish that to be true, the scripture simply cannot support this interpretation. First, Greek has words for many variations of homosexual behavior, and Paul here uses none of those, but rather an umbrella term that condemns all variations. Thus, such hairsplitting is not a faithful interpretation of these verses.

Therefore, any exegesis of this passage that presents homosexuality of any variation as something other than sin reveals a doctrine of Scripture that is in opposition to a Reformed tenet of the authority of Scripture.³² Adherence to this belief does not make us phobic or hatemongering; indeed the gospel of

²⁷ Cf. the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15.

²⁸ His blogpost cites a wide range of primary and secondary sources: <https://theologyintheraw.com/the-cultural-context-for-the-hair-length-style-vs-head-coverings-debate-in-1-cor-11-the-meaning-of-kephale-part-12/> (copy available from author)

²⁹ Fortson, *Unchanging Witness*, 326–28.

³⁰ Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*.

³¹ Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues*, 3rd edition (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009), 52–83.

³² Cf. 2 Tim 3:16-17.

love does not permit even the appearance of this.³³ However, our doctrine of Scripture does make us nonconformists to the prevailing culture of the USA.

In any case, the rest of the passage in Romans 1 provides a context of disapproval because of the references to shame and penalty.

“Shameful” here is expressed by the word ἀσχημοσύνην

The penalty “in themselves” corresponds to Paul’s comment in 1 Cor 6:18 that claims homosexuality is a sin against one’s own body. In other words, there is a natural consequence to this kind of sin that it would not be helpful to speculate upon.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

This passage appears to be a straightforward warning listing those who will not inherit the kingdom of God, but in context, it is clear that the hope expressed in the last verse of this pericope is for transformation through the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit. (1 Cor 6:11) The larger context is the holiness of the church and the outworking of the gospel in a community of Christians.

The phrase “men who have sex with men” collapses two Greek words (*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*) into one expression. The meaning of these two Greek words has been the subject of much scholarly disagreement. The first term has a range of meaning that extends beyond but also includes sexuality. The first-century Jewish thinker Philo uses *malakos* to refer to the men of Sodom from Genesis 19.³⁴ The second term is not found in Greek literature outside Christian sources that refer to 1 Cor 6:9.³⁵ However, in the LXX version of Leviticus that Paul would have read, the vocabulary used in Lev

³³ Lev 19:18; Matt 5:43-44, 22:39; John 13:35; Rom 13:8; 1 Cor 16:14 *inter alia*.

³⁴ *Abraham* 1.35-36

³⁵ For a list of these sources, see Fortson, *Unchanging Witness*, 296–97.

20:13 is *meta arsenos koiten gynaikos* (to lie with a woman as with a man). *Arsenokoitai* then could have been coined by Paul. There is no indication that its meaning includes the concept of exploitation or prostitution or any of the other obviously morally objectionable aspects of sexual activity, as some have interpreted the semantic range of this Pauline neologism.

Some have interpreted these two terms to refer to the passive (*malakos*) and dominant (*arsenokoitai*) homosexual partners, but this is by no means clear or definitive. Furthermore, the injunction in Lev 20 makes clear that both partners are liable to punishment so there is nothing to be gained by making such a distinction. These words have also been interpreted to mean boys and men, in the sense of condemning pederasty, but the Greek language has a fully developed vocabulary for these terms, none of which are used here. Thus the plain sense of this scripture addresses adult men, not children. If children were meant here, Greek has vocabulary (*paiderastia*) to express that and Paul, an educated man, would have used it.

The key point for this scripture however, is that Paul expresses the hope of life transformation Christians can expect because “you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Cor 6:11) Because Christians belong to a holy God, Christians embrace the transforming power of the Holy Spirit to live holy lives. This scripture is not about condemnation therefore, but about hope.

Moreover, the references to homosexuality here are about actions, not about identities. Nowhere in the Bible is there a notion of sexual identity in the modern sense that US American culture understands. These biblical injunctions are strictly about what people do with their bodies, not about how they identify as sexual beings.

1 Timothy 1:9-10

We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.

The term translated “those practicing homosexuality” (*arsenokoitai*) is the same word Paul uses in 1 Cor 6:9. This comes in a list of those for whom the law was made, to reveal that such activity is contrary to sound doctrine. In other words, those who engage in homosexuality—along with lawbreakers, rebels, the ungodly, the sinful, the unholy and irreligious, murderers, the sexually immoral, slave traders, and liars—are showing that their understanding of God is unsound, because their actions reveal choices that are explicitly counter to what is revealed in scripture.

How does this work? The law was given, according to NT writers, not as a basis for gaining salvation, but rather the keeping of law is evidence that one knows God and is growing to become more like Christ. Those who are being transformed by the Holy Spirit, who are seeking to obey the biblical imperatives for a holy life, will reveal the holiness of God in the holiness of their own daily lives.

Jude 6-7

And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great Day. Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

These verses in Jude refer explicitly to Genesis 19 and the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The writer of Jude explicitly identifies sexual immorality (*ekporneusasai*) as the sin that merited its destruction. More specifically, the author uses the phrase "*apelthousai opiso sarkos heteras*" – literally, “pursuing different flesh,” to further explain homosexuality.

This passage compares the disobedient angels kept in the darkness of the underworld awaiting judgment to those who engage in behavior like that of Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, that is, in sexual immorality (a general term) and homosexuality (a more specific term). What they have in common is that they all are undergoing eternal punishment. The question that this usually elicits is, “Are gay people going to hell?” The answer here is: the wicked people of Sodom and Gomorrah seem to be punished that way, and the fallen angels also, but as to the fate of anyone else, this particular

scripture is silent. Moreover, the eternal fate of any person is beyond our knowledge and thus should not be used as a tool for evangelism, nor to scare others in a misdirected effort to show them the love of Christ.

Conclusion

The Bible presents a consistent sexual ethics that condemns sex outside of heterosexual marriage. The vocabulary used to communicate this includes but is not limited to homosexuality; therefore it is to be understood as one of many sexual behaviors disapproved by God. Discussion of sexual ethics cannot demonize one particular type of forbidden behavior over another, and Christians who do so go beyond God's Word.

Discernment requires responsible hermeneutics that hold the gospel of grace in Christ's love at the center of our discussion. Gender non-conforming is something the Bible was aware of, and the condemnations thereof involve both a mixture of gender norms of the time (e.g. Deut 22:5) and theological categories. The faithful exegete will be able to discern where Scripture assumes cultural norms and where it challenges cultural norms with theological truths. We do this in ECO with the ordination of women, and it behooves us to develop a robust biblical theology that addresses gender and sexual norms and roles without attempting to replicate a different culture.

There is a popular argument that draws a comparison between heterosexuality and homosexuality as different but equally circumscribed and valid behaviors. This argument asks, if heterosexuality is right sometimes (i.e., marriage) and wrong sometimes (e.g., rape, incest, prostitution, etc.), then isn't homosexuality also right (i.e., in marriage, or more commonly: in adult consensual exclusive relationship) or wrong sometimes (in the same scenarios where heterosexual activity is condemned)?³⁶ By morally equating homosexuality and heterosexuality, this approach claims that nuance is required to understand these so-called clobber passages. Good exegesis, however nuanced, does not find that scripture equates these two types of sexuality.

What the Bible notably is lacking is any scripture condemning heterosexual behavior categorically. The Bible does have multiple passages

³⁶ Colby Martin, *UnClobber: Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2022), 152–54.

categorically condemning homosexual behavior. What the Bible also does not have is any scripture that condemns any human being anywhere for their sexual identity, because this is not a category addressed by the biblical writers, nor did it exist in antiquity. Thus, Christians must look to other commands of scripture for guidance on these issues. The answer of course is that people are not issues, and the gospel is clear that Christians are to treat everyone with the humility and grace that belongs to human beings (Job 6:14; Col 3:12), showing no favoritism (James 2:9; Acts 10:34; Rom 2:11), and refusing to judge others lest we arrogate to ourselves the prerogative that belongs to God alone (Matt 7:1-3).

Thus, homosexual behavior in the Bible is not permissible for God's holy people. Various sexual identities are minimally addressed in scripture, but nowhere does one find permission to condemn others. If we are looking forward to the renewal of all things in the heavenly city of Jerusalem (cf. Rev 21:5), we must focus on what God is calling us to be and to become. We will be more concerned with the gospel and the life of transformation into holy people serving a holy God than with pointing out others' sins. We will seek to do kingdom work seeking to introduce people to Jesus' love and grace, before demanding discipleship. We will not require that anyone be perfectly sinless, because we know that we ourselves are not in any position to throw stones. (John 8:1-11) We will not violate the gospel of welcome by using God's word to condemn others or prevent them from coming to faith in Christ (Matt 23:13). We will obey the sum of the torah as Jesus taught us, by loving God with all our heart, mind, and strength, and loving others as ourselves (Mark 12:30-31).

Chapter 4

The Wrong Side of the Rainbow—A Biblical Theology of Reconciliation

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

The rainbow is a contested symbol in our culture. While the rainbow-colored flag is a clear sign of a political coalition identity known through various acronyms like LGBT (and more), the rainbow still holds significance as a happy symbol for children, for hope after rain. The prism creating a rainbow is clearly identified as Pink Floyd's famous album cover. And "Over the Rainbow" remains a popular song over 8 decades after it was first released for the *Wizard of Oz* in 1939. This song is an escapist fantasy of a little girl stuck in Kansas during the Dust Bowl that has nevertheless come to symbolize a generic secularized hope about some ideal place where dreams come true. And so we also see the pot of gold idea with the rainbow as some symbol of luck and good fortune. It is here, with the leprechauns, that we find a hint of an old religious connection. Words like blessing, fortune, hap (happy), favor, all once meant that the gods had given a person good things to make them thrive. Rainbows have long been viewed as something divine, a kind of message from the heavens—a connection or portal with another realm for Judy Garland or the Norse gods crossing the rainbow bridge Bifrost from Asgard to Midgard (earth).

So, it might be surprising to learn that in the Ancient Near East, the cultural background for Genesis 9, the rainbow was viewed as a weapon. The Hebrew word *qesheth* does not refer specifically to the rainbow, but to any bow. Ancient Near Easterners saw a strung bow, perhaps one even held taught when they looked at a rainbow. It might look like a bow that is hung up on a wall, signifying that peace has come after conflict, that a storm god has put aside his weapons after spending his anger in a storm. Or it might, as I will suggest in Genesis 9, convey a bow pulled ready for an attack, and in this case, rather than pointing down at the earth, pointing up at the heavens. But before we get to the bow that God has pointed at himself, let's turn back the pages of Genesis to get a sense of how the story of the flood and the rainbow covenant makes sense.

Creation, Separation, and Judgment

The Bible begins with creation, of course, but it is less often observed that, while God created through the word, it is a word of differentiation or distinction. One of the primary acts of divinity or kingship in the ancient world was the right and ability to discern, to be wise, to know good and evil, right from left, up from down, etc. This is part of what wisdom meant. But wisdom was not simply the act of discerning things that already exist, wisdom for a king is the act of creating distinction because that is how order is made. Chaos is undifferentiation, the collapse of difference into confusion. It is the role of the gods and the kings to maintain order by maintaining difference and distinction. This is what judgment exists for, and this is part of the rationale behind some of the seemingly odd biblical prohibitions, like those restricting the mixing of different fibers in clothes, or some of the food laws.

God created through judgment, through wisdom, and through differentiation. God maintains the world's order by maintaining correct differences. So, God establishes boundaries to keep things in their rightful places.¹ And God judges the wicked by removing the boundaries that define them and their property.² Boundaries are what define identity and property, and the removal or confusion of boundaries is a form of plunder or dissolution or exile.

Now, the final act of differentiation in creation before the Sabbath where God divides his act of creation from taking up his sovereign rest, is the act of differentiating male and female in humans. For the authors of the Bible, along with their Ancient Near Eastern neighbors, sexual differentiation and the rituals surrounding how the difference is temporarily concealed in sexual intercourse, are of great importance, because these form the bedrock foundation of human society and how it operates under the dome of heaven. Where the purity laws of sexuality seem foreign to us, to the original audience of the Bible, these would have made sense as part of how the order of the cosmos is maintained through safeguarding difference and union. This is also how we can understand why the Bible views prostitution so negatively, as opposed to other cultures, like ancient Greece or our own in which sex workers

¹ E.g. Job 26:10; Ps 74:17; Jer 5:22.

² E.g. Isa 11:13; Prov 10:25.

and pornography are understood to be part of the normal fabric of the marketplace.

Thus, creation in the Bible is about creating and maintaining separation and definition, with attendant signs to demarcate differences, the sun and moon for day and night, the sea and land, male and female.

Imaging God as Male and Female

I have written in many places throughout my own books and ECO books about what the image of God means, so I will just summarize here and point out the important parts for our conversation on gender and sexuality.

The image of God has nothing to do with “communicable attributes” of the divine nature. This is a great anachronism of early Medieval theology imposed on a Jewish text written long before those kinds of categories existed.³ So, the image of God has nothing to do with “human nature” because that’s simply not an OT category. Rather, the image of God is a performative sign used to maintain the differentiation and order of creation. That is, the image of God is a job humans are given to do. They are to be like God in having the kind of dominion that God has, which is demonstrated by judgment through wisdom for the keeping of things in order.

Thus, when we get to the temptation narrative in Genesis 3, we find that the wisdom, judgment, and thus ultimately the role of God as king is being questioned by gaining access to the knowledge of good and evil apart from God’s judgment. We have to remember that ancient people did not believe in objective law to which even kings were subject. Kings made law, they didn’t obey it. So, to have knowledge of good and evil is to act like God. Adam and Eve became like God by judging for themselves what is good and evil, by remaking the whole cosmos according to their own paltry wisdom. And in this way, the differentiation between heaven and earth is confused, and God must judge to return people to their place.⁴

³ I’ve written at length about the chronological impossibility of metaphysical theology in the OT based in the history of philosophical thought postdating its authorship and the cultural plausibility factors required for metaphysics in GP Wagenfuhr, *Plundering Egypt: A Subversive Christian Ethic of Economy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016).

⁴ I’ve written at length about this notion of sin as world-construction or “cosmization” through the acting like God as judges in both GP Wagenfuhr, *Plundering Eden: A Subversive Christian*

Adam and Eve were on a job interview in the garden of Eden. Would they be able to bear the responsibility of godlike judgment? They were being tested to join the divine council as members of a ruling body. They failed this test in ways that Jesus would later succeed.

No “Fall” but *Making* an Image

Adam and Eve’s sin is not described anywhere in Scripture as a “fall” either from a “state of grace” or from some ideal mode of “human nature.” This is also an anachronism that comes from later Greek-inspired ways of thinking. This is vital because this has everything to do with how we understand the gospel and what it means for human sexuality.⁵

The result of playing God was an immediate exposure. They were instantly aware that their own flesh revealed everything about their own lack of power. To be the image of God is to be responsible for one’s choices. It is a frightful responsibility to make judgments, and it requires not just power or ability, it requires maturity and experience. Adam and Eve were ashamed because their own lack of responsibility was exposed. Their flesh, instead of imaging God, now revealed only vulnerability. Thus, they immediately turned to clothing themselves.

Clothes are the first invention recorded in the Bible. The very first artifice was designed to hide the vulnerability of a person and project an image of confidence. Adam and Eve had started to remake the world in their image, to put on a mask, to have a different public and private persona. Rather than rightly discerning difference in the world, they now attempt to differentiate

Theology of Creation and Ecology (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020); Wagenfuhr, *Plundering Egypt*.

⁵ If we narrate sin as a fall that ruins an ideal of perfection, we inevitably create a narrative in which Jesus saves us from that corruption. And if sexual confusion is a result of “the fall” then the logical outcome must be a radical form of celibacy. Asexuality would be the ideal of perfection then, given that Adam and Eve don’t have sex before they sin, that Jesus remained celibate. Christians weren’t the first or only to narrate such a story, nor the first to surmise that sex and sexual desire is “fallen.” Plato in *The Republic* clearly shows how the ideal or just state of affairs in the human or in the body politic was to have the rational faculty govern the appetitive and passionate. This notion did, however have a huge impact on the history of Christianity, particularly in the Middle Ages. The larger issue, however, is that locating sin in human ontology ironically has legitimized narratives of the self that transform sex desire and behavior into identity.

themselves by concealment. They started acting, playing a part, pretending, playing dress up. Rather than revealing the character of God by their public behavior, they now have to project an image. So, we might obviously point out drag culture as a heightened expression of this in which usually men project a highly cultivated public image of a crafted persona, complete with a different voice and character. But this would be unfair to single out drag culture for this. All culture is an expression of how humans have transgressed, not simply God's law, but God's image. All culture is an expression of how we all play an elaborate dress-up game of cultivating an image of ourselves.

If there is a tragic "fall" of humanity, it is the fall into masked projections that come with a refusal to be responsibly the same person in public and private. Thus, it is primarily the sexual organs that are the source of shame and demand covering. The very means by which human difference comes together must now be the most dressed-up, the most highly ritualized, the most culturally celebrated and concealed, because we must now control the narrative and ritual of difference and unity. The very structure of the cosmos depends on the differentiations we make, and the most basic human difference that is present from birth, is biological sex.

Exile for Discipline

God expelled Adam and Eve from the garden to maintain difference, and God protected his territory by establishing hard boundaries with armed guards. We might be familiar with this concept of protection of difference with the term "holy" or "sacred." Meaning lies in difference, and whoever controls the forms of differentiation controls meaning. God "covers up" in response to human coverings. God hides in response to human hiding, and he does this by means of exiling his people from his presence. This is not a permanent exile, but one that is done for the sake of discipline. "God disciplines those he loves."⁶ The purpose of exile and hardship is to learn that—no matter the stories we tell about ourselves and the images we make of ourselves through clothes, persona, and civilization—we are not gods. Our stories always break down, and the creation itself resists us in our pursuit of "making a name for ourselves"⁷ by building and clothing. It is only in the failure of our clothing

⁶ Heb 12:6; Rev 3:19.

⁷ Gen 11:4.

that we confront God. “No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”⁸ Thus, it is in the wilderness that God is confronted.⁹

Tale of Two Peoples: Genesis 4-5

The stories of Cain, Abel, and Seth are often missed for the depth they communicate. While they might seem only like genealogies, these are genealogies that reveal the heart of the people. The names and numbers of these genealogies matter, because their primary purpose is not to communicate “history” as modern people think of it (such a thing didn’t exist until the 17th century), but to tell a story of the way of life and the way of death.

Cain (Spear) is jealous of his brother Abel (Vapor, meaningless)¹⁰ because of God’s favor. God tells Cain that Sin is crouching at his door like a wild beast, and Cain’s job is not to let it attack and win, but to go on the offensive and “master it.”¹¹ This is the very first use of the word “sin” in the Bible and the relationship of humans to it is not some declaration that all humans are victims of it, but that their vocation is to master it, to dominate it. Of course, Sin dominates Cain and he kills Abel, establishing a whole lineage of people who are dominated by Sin and who bear the character of those who are made in the image of Sin. The completion of the line of Adam through Cain comes in the seventh generation. Lamech boasts about his 70-fold retribution and violence to his wives. Cain’s lineage bears all the fruit of civilization: the musicians, the weapon makers, the blacksmiths, but their essential character is violent mastery by Sin.

Adam’s lineage through Seth reveals what happens when the image of God is lived out correctly, Seth being the image of Adam, who was made in the image of God. Cain is not said to be the image of Adam. It is in Seth’s lineage that we are told people began calling on the name of Yahweh. And the seventh son through Seth is Enoch, who walks with God so closely he ascends to heaven without dying. Lamech is mastered by Sin, Enoch walks with God. Lamech and his kin boast of the works of their hands, their own prowess in hunting, their mastery of arts and crafts. They master or dominate everything

⁸ Heb 4:13.

⁹ Cf. Ex 3, 5:1; Num 1:1; 1 Kings 19

¹⁰ Abel is the same word *hevel* that is a refrain throughout Ecclesiastes as “meaningless.”

¹¹ Gen 4:7.

except themselves and Sin. They gain violent victory over others but have to play make-up and dress-up for one another. Enoch and Seth's lineage leave behind relationships but little else. They do not need to make a name for themselves; they live for others.

Sexual Corruption Before and After the Flood: Genesis 6 and 9-10

So, we see that in the days after Lamech, in the days of Noah (grandson of Enoch of Seth) the world is full of violence and the erasure of divisions that make sense of the world. This is primarily understood through sexual intercourse, here between the "sons of God" and the "daughters of men". Many biblical scholars read "sons of God" as referring to angelic beings marrying human women, and thus the transgression is between heaven and earth. It is possible to read it as a corruption of the line of Seth with the line of Cain in a way reminiscent of how Solomon meets his downfall by intermarrying with foreign women. While it is perhaps impossible to be certain, the outcome is the same, there is a blending of sexual boundaries combined with violence associated with heroic or renowned people that are leading the creation into a death-spiral cycle of violence. This is the reason given for the flood. While Noah kept the lineage of Seth alive, and thus the image and function of Adam was not lost, the rest of the world seemed to be a failure. Here sexual intercourse is shown as a representation, along with violence, of the transgression of boundaries that give meaning. The mind turned always toward evil is not focused on breaking the law in itself, but focused on reshaping the boundaries of God's creation in ways that show that humans are working against their created intention of revealing the character of God's dominion to the world. Their own dominion isn't by peaceful discernment through wisdom, but through a doubly promiscuous penetration of the flesh of others: of women in sex and of men in violence.

After the flood, to which we'll return shortly, Noah's son Ham continues the spirit of Cain. While again, scholars debate what "uncovering the nakedness" of Noah means, the point is that there is some sexual transgression involved here, whether of observation only or some physical contact. This transgression reveals the character of Ham who is the father of Canaan, Egypt, and also the grandfather of Nimrod who builds many of the

cities that will represent the enemies of God throughout the OT like Nineveh (major city of Assyria which destroys Israel), and Babel (i.e. Babylon which destroys Judah). Nimrod, like Cain, is a violent man and a city builder—a consummate coward who hides behind structures of an invented *cosmos* in cosmetics or cosmopolitanism.

Sex and the Cities: Babel, Sodom, and Babylon

Nimrod is said to build Babel, to which Genesis 11 turns. This is a much-misunderstood story that often focuses on the wrong details. In continuing the image of Cain, Babel is a place built on a desire to not be scattered as wanderers, but to be secure among people of one's own likeness. It is by drawing their own boundaries and building a cosmos¹² of their own that the people of Babel think they will "make a name for themselves." Rather than receiving a name, they will make it, and they will make that name or reputation by construction. Babel takes the notion of making clothes and a public persona to the logical conclusion: humans desire to create artificial realities outside of God's creation within which they can define themselves. So, "making a name" is really about forging an identity through building. They would approach heaven on their own terms, through their own religion. They would, like Cain, refuse to seek God's favor in mastering Sin, rather they would seek to master the world instead—bullying the weak to play God through cooperative endeavors.

Genesis 11 does not contain problematic sexual relations, though the book of Genesis does pay special attention to sexual relations throughout, and we might mention the story of Lot in Sodom as exemplary in this. Lot and Abraham choose to go in two directions, with Lot choosing to go into the fertile Jordan valley where the cities were, Abraham choosing to remain a wanderer. Lot is visited by two angels who the Sodomite men all wish to gang-rape. While this story seems strange to us, it is again an example of a transgression of many boundaries that reveals the wicked Cainite heart of the people of Sodom. Not only do the men desire to sexually abuse the angels-as-men, but they transgress the boundaries of hospitality, marriage, home, and heaven. Lot, in defending his guests is called out by saying, "This fellow came

¹² City building in the ancient world is often called "cosmization" by sociologists.

here as an alien, and he would play the judge!”¹³ That is, the Sodomites see Lot as usurping their authority by trying to tell them what is good and evil, for Lot said they were acting wickedly. Sodom could not stand the presence of the people of God and the angels, and as happens in prison gangs, newcomers are subjected to domination through the shame of penetration. The flesh is owned by collapsing boundaries of control in precisely the place where control is most basic to one’s sense of self. This famous story is not, then, first and foremost about homosexuality in itself, though it involves that. It is the world’s attempt at penetrating the people of God and owning even their nakedness that is so offensive. *It is the elimination of the difference between God’s people and the people of the world that presents the ultimate problem that demands God’s judgment.*

So, returning to Babel or Babylon, we come to the tale of two cities in Revelation 18. For some reason translators of Genesis 11 do not make this explicit, but the Hebrew *babel* is the title of the same city and empire that later is Babylon in Greek. This connects us with imagery that the author of Revelation is intentionally picking up on. Babylon is presented in Revelation as the paradigmatic city. At the time Revelation was written, Babylon as a city was inconsequential, so many have seen it as a coded reference to Rome. Revelation’s point is to be thematic and present the grand human project as the very same thing as found in Genesis 11 and the books of exile. Babylon is the “great whore” who has dominated the people of God. It is wealthy, desirable, beautiful, and all the kings and merchants of the earth desire her and find themselves “in” her. Throughout the Bible sexual promiscuity is presented as the way of the world and its false gods. This isn’t about Victorian morality. This is the same Bible and same people who regard the Song of Solomon as scripture and who think “rejoice in the wife of your youth” is God’s word.¹⁴ Sexual promiscuity is about mastery by Sin. To submit to sexual domination is to be mastered in one’s most intimate person. It is to be owned at the heart of one’s flesh so that not even the boundaries of the body remain intact. Sexual purity, at the same time, isn’t some goal in itself, it becomes an image of what being the people of God is about: mastery of Sin. This is, again, why it is not proper from a biblical perspective to portray sin as the corruption of our nature,

¹³ Gen 19:8.

¹⁴ Prov 5:18.

but as a rebellion that leads to domination. We are slaves to Sin.¹⁵ We should be masters of it. And through Christ, we can be “more than conquerors.”¹⁶

So, the call of Revelation 18 is for holiness, for the people of God to “come out of her” like Lot came out of Sodom. And God’s people are to rejoice over her destruction as well. Indeed, it is the act of leaving Babylon that enables them to join the marriage feast of the Lamb in chapter 19. The judgment of God on Babylon is what the people of God are waiting for to join that feast.

But this requires us to understand why the people of God are “in” Babylon in the first place, and to that, we return to the Old Testament particularly to Ezekiel and Hosea.

Israel the Unfaithful Wife

Ezekiel 16 compares the people of God with the people of Sodom in a way favorable to the people of Sodom. Ezekiel tells a rather graphic parable about God’s people as a faithless bride. God had rescued an abandoned infant of dubious parentage, still wallowing in its birth blood, raised her, clothed her, gave her honor and dignity, and eventually married her (i.e. committed to a covenant) and made her fit to be a queen. But she played with everyone and every other god around her. And while Ezekiel piles up imagery of her brazenness, he twists the dagger when he tells them in verse 31 when he says that even whores take payment, but his people did not. His people gained nothing out of this, weren’t even savvy enough to sell their body-politic. God states that he will give her over to the people whom she desired, to the nations. But God will remember his covenant and will not hand her over forever. This is a message echoed by the story of Hosea with his wife Gomer, and this is the message that Revelation 18-19 picks up on, though it transfers the whoredom to Babylon. The metaphor is clear. It’s not simply worship of idols that is problematic. This isn’t just a moral problem. The life of being dominated by sin is presented as sexual promiscuity. Having multiple sexual partners is no image of freedom, it is the picture of being a slave in the Bible. Promiscuity is associated with wealth, with merchants, with kings, with idols in Ezekiel 16 and Revelation 18. Worldly success comes by many forms of interpenetration, not just sexual, though sexual imagery presents the most basic and graphic

¹⁵ Jn 8:34; Rom 6:16-20.

¹⁶ Rom 8:37.

portrayal of what it means to join with the world. To be of the world is to be “known” by it. The people of God are exiled to the world they desired. But God has not abandoned his wife, even if there is a period of separation, as it were, from God’s promised land and his presence. Rather, God is patient and he exercises discipline, not through a form of domestic violence, but through the logic of natural consequences. The people know that life comes from God through his covenant, so they know what they are choosing if they choose the way of death. Rather than force them to his will, or kill his rivals, God allows his bride to commit adultery, knowing that she will cry out in distress for rescue and will return. Jeremiah 3 picks up this same metaphor and directly links the whoring idolatry of Israel to a decree of divorce (3:8). The exile and destruction of Israel is linked to idolatry, which is linked to sexual immorality. These are “abominations” that pile up on the land itself, causing it to reject the people, a notion we’ll explore in a moment. Here we can see though, that God desires the return of Israel with true conviction and repentance. If she returns to God, God will again bless her. God will make a new covenant, renew the kingship with true shepherds, and they will not miss the Ark of the Covenant, or even the temple, because this new relationship will not need the mediation of these cultic objects (3:11-18).

So, the very sin of Israel and Judah is portrayed in explicitly sexual terms, and as we’ll see in a moment, that is not simply a metaphor. The marriage covenant is not just a metaphor for God’s relationship with his people, it is the definition of the people and the reason for which God chose them. Their identity is derived from this marriage, and outside of it, they will be used by the world, taken advantage of, even while desiring the world’s fruitless affections. Yet, what do we make of this seemingly strange link that so many OT authors make between marriage, the covenant, and adultery? For that we must turn to Leviticus, which Ezekiel 23 (Oholah and Oholibah) has directly in mind in enumerating the sins of the people that cause their exile, and in this we’ll find a deep connection between murder, blood, life, sex, and idolatry.

Leviticus and OT Sin

Leviticus 18 and 20 provide common proof-texts for debates about licit and illicit sexual relations, and understandably so. They represent very simple

commands that seem easy to use in any context. And yet, there is a logic to Leviticus and to the OT's ideas about sin and how sin is dealt with that has largely been lost through oversimplified visions of sin. So, let's dive into Leviticus for a moment.

The first thing to say is that scholars think Leviticus 18 and 20 constitute a reform in Israel. The commands given there do not represent the practices that are seen in Genesis, for example. There are numerous practices among the Patriarchs that fall afoul of Leviticus' commands, something that would not surprise the authors and readers of the Torah.¹⁷ God is at work through the giving of his law to transform a chosen pagan people whose father is Abraham into a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation."¹⁸

The second thing to say is that not all sins are treated the same, nor do they have the same methods for overcoming it. Sins like theft or defrauding a neighbor are not treated with "negative retribution" but with positive restoration, or at least compensation. These kinds of sins incur *ashem* which some translations render as "guilt." Numbers 5:5-10 deals with this issue, and other passages deal with other examples of *ashem*, like unintentional sins.¹⁹ Restitution comes in the form of repayment in kind, plus 20%. This kind of guilt is categorically different to bloodguilt or *dam*.²⁰ There is no equivocation of the kind of misdeed of theft and murder. Certainly, both are commanded against in the Ten Commandments, but the consequences for murder is death, and the consequence for manslaughter remains a form of exile in cities of refuge.²¹ There is no religious ritual that forgives murder or bloodguilt in the OT. Similarly, there are no temple-based methods for the forgiveness for grave sins like idolatry and sexual immorality. These are the exact sins we see manifest before the flood and enumerated in the adulterous Israel passages we examined above. They are also the sins particularly condemned in the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. These kinds of grave sins corrupt the very land itself and, when the land has had its capacity of evil, it "vomits them out."²² Exile is the only remedy

¹⁷ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries 3A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 1536.

¹⁸ Ex 19:6; Deut 26:19.

¹⁹ See Lev 5.

²⁰ The word "blood" is the same as "bloodguilt."

²¹ Num 35.

²² Lev 18:24-30, 20:22.

for a people who do not purge such evil from their midst and exclude or stone those who practice “abominations” (*to‘evah*). So God “divorces” such a people who tolerate these practices. Why? The answer lies in blood, life, and death.

In the OT, blood is where life is²³ and all life belongs to God. The strong and numerous prohibitions against the drinking or eating of blood are found in both OT and NT, and it is because of this belief that life comes from God and must return to God (either through an altar or by giving it to the earth). Thus, the lifeblood of Abel cries out to God against Cain.²⁴ Whereas we tend to see blood merely as a reminder of death and disease, for Israel and the early church, blood was all about life and life-giving. Murder is wrong because it is life-taking, stealing from God that which belongs to God alone. “All life is mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine...”²⁵ Hence David’s confession that his sin is against God in the murder of Uriah.²⁶ Not only human blood, but all blood belongs to God, including the blood of animals. God gives animals life and demands that if they are to die, their lifeblood be returned to him and the people eat only the meat.²⁷ Even the slaughter of livestock, according to Leviticus, must only happen in the presence of God at the altar. Yes, Leviticus does not have a mode of eating any livestock animal apart from a festival offering. The life of the animals belongs to God and its meat, in many ways, belongs to the community.²⁸

So, blood is life, and life belongs to God. That makes sense of murder, but how does that connect with sex and idolatry? Blood is life and sex is about the giving of life. The prohibitions against homosexuality and bestiality come from the notion that any sex divorced from its life-giving function is a similar form of life-taking to murder. These are both abominations that both deserve the same penalty of death.

Adultery and incest are slightly different in that they are of course potentially procreative, but they do not represent covenant-based relations in

²³ Cf. Gen 9:4; Lev 17:11-14; Deut 12:23.

²⁴ Gen 4:10.

²⁵ Ezek 18:4.

²⁶ Ps 51:4.

²⁷ See Lev 17.

²⁸ This should caution us against proof-texting the passages on homosexuality while also eating industrially slaughtered meat, which is a violation of Levitical law that equally demands exile or social exclusion because of bloodguilt (Lev 17:3-4).

which the life created will be the life maintained. For sex is not about making babies, it's about creating a family, a whole household, which is itself about the fruitful flourishing of life. This does not imply, necessarily, that all sex within a covenanted marriage was solely for the purpose of procreation. The Song of Songs exists to suggest otherwise. Only that it is the pursuit of sex for pleasure without regard to the making of a household within which life can thrive that can be seen as undermining the whole order of life-giving. "Free love" is therefore a form of life-taking and a vampiric mentality, according to the logic of Leviticus.

So, now we can see why murder connects with sex, and why sex then connects with the covenant and idolatry. Idolatry is a form of prostitution because it turns the people of God away from their proper household and their father/husband to other lovers who are not life-givers. The idols are "nothings." They do not give life. They are made by human hands.²⁹ Thus, those who turn to worship their own creations rather than the Creator end up engaging in all sorts of forms of illicit behaviors³⁰ because they are not mastering Sin, nor living in the household of the life-giver. They are partying in the house of death and they bring death with them.

We can also add to this Jesus' own teaching about the parable of the talents. Those who are faithful in small things may be trustworthy of larger things. Those who are not faithful to their covenanted marriages to create households of life-giving and life-fostering should not be trusted with managing life in politics. We should add here that singleness is not treated in this logic as problematic, which is why the NT also lifts up singleness as a positive state... but only singleness that is defined within service to foster a life-giving community. Similarly, we might say that there is no condemnation of barren couples, again, provided they are contributing to a life-giving community of God's people.

These forms of life-taking evils are "abominations" that empower sin and corrupt the connection of the community to God, the source of all life. In Leviticus, sin produces a kind of pollution or corruption that is like an "aerial

²⁹ Isa 44:9-20.

³⁰ Rom 1:22-32.

miasma”³¹ that is attracted to and settles on the sanctuary itself. Sin chokes out the possibility of God dwelling with his people, and thus of God blessing his people. To practice and tolerate abominations is to despise God’s presence. Hence Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor 5:9-13 echoes exactly the logic of Leviticus. Sexual immorality can have no place among the people of God. These sins do not produce guilt that is affixed to the individual but finds its way to corrupt the source of life for the community. Thus, where there are rituals for purgation of these sins (Hebrew *chattat*), these rituals cleanse only the sanctuary, not the guilty person.³² Hence even Yom Kippur (Lev 16) does not forgive such misdeeds for the guilty, rather it heaps up all the sins of the people and drives them out of the community, exiling them to the desert with its demons (Azazel) who themselves are (likely) authors of death.³³ God alone has the authority to forgive murder, sexual immorality, and idolatry since these are ultimately sins against the life-giver, and this forgiveness comes outside of ritual or sacrifice, but by *new covenant*.

While there are no rituals for purifying the guilt of murder, sexual immorality, nor idolatry, that does not mean the Bible teaches that such people go straight to Hell. Rather, God holds out the promise of a new covenant, a renewed marriage, in which God would forgive all such transgressions in order to be reconciled to his people, his wayward bride.³⁴ He would even make the “whore” into a “virgin” again.³⁵ But because there are no failsafe mechanisms for purging this evil or forgiving life-takers the community cannot presume upon God’s grace to simply let such abominations go unanswered. Even Paul commands the church to “purge the evil” in the case of sexual immorality.³⁶

³¹ Andrew Remington Rillera, *Lamb of the Free: Recovering the Varied Sacrificial Understandings of Jesus’s Death* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2024), 94. Referencing Jacob Milgrom, “Israel’s Sanctuary: The Priestly ‘Picture of Dorian Gray,’” *Revue Biblique* 83 (1976): 392.

³² As Rillera notes, “*kipper* does not mean ‘reconcile,’ nor ‘save,’ nor ‘forgive.’ Equally importantly, only holy objects within the sacred dwelling place, or later the temple, receive the ritual action of *kipper*. In other words, when *kipper* happens, what is decontaminated or purified is a holy object in the sanctuary, *not people*.” Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 2024, 4.

³³ For a technical discussion of the Day of Purgation see Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 2024.

³⁴ Jer 31:31-34.

³⁵ Jer 31:4, 21.

³⁶ 1 Cor 5:13; quoting from various commands in Deut 21-22.

The Rainbow Covenant

Now that we've seen the logic of two peoples, the mastery of Sin over the one, and the dominion of godlike maturity of the other, along with the meaning of sex and marriage in the Bible, let us now return to the rainbow and its meaning in the Bible. The flood is one of the most harrowing stories of the entire Bible and is most certainly not a children's story. However, its place in Genesis 1-11 is vital. If we miss the theological message, particularly by arguing about whether and when it happened in history, we will misunderstand the whole of the Bible. The Flood is about the rainbow, it is about this first covenant that God makes with his creation.³⁷ The first covenant of the Bible is a promise of God to the whole creation that he will not destroy it. Now, some have argued about the technicality that God may not destroy it with water again, but will one day with fire, pointing to 2 Peter 3, which we'll get to shortly. This is also incorrect. God has promised not to destroy his creation, nor to act unilaterally with it. Instead, God establishes and empowers a people to represent him and his word to the world. Noah will "bring rest" to the creation.³⁸ Genesis 8-9 thus establishes the character of God for the rest of the story.

Less often quoted is the first version of this covenant given in Genesis 8:21-22, worth repeating here.

And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odor, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."

The promise is that God will withhold his judgment, even though humans are evil. God will not engage in collective punishment. Human evil, and evil in general, will be allowed to continue. Thus, we see the problem of

³⁷ While some might talk about an explicit or implicit covenant, particularly a covenant of works with Adam and Eve, this is understandable but misguided. A covenant exists between strangers or estranged people. A covenant mediates a relationship. There is no need for this in Genesis 1-2. It is the sin of Genesis 3 that requires some kind of mediation, some kind of clarification of relationship that sets clear terms. Even a marriage covenant requires that the two be strangers. Kinship is not covenanted, for example.

³⁸ Gen 5:29

evil answered from the very beginning of the Bible. While God is capable of judgment, God refuses to judge because God does not engage in nuclear-option solutions out of wrath. Instead, the character of Yahweh is to be patient, even with sinners. Jesus will explain the same lesson through the parable of the wheat and weeds.³⁹ God is not in the business of actively sorting out good and evil people now. This means that bad things happen to good people, and it means that good things happen to bad people. This isn't "common grace" as usually described, as part of God's creation.⁴⁰ This is God's patience. So, 2 Peter 3, that famous passage about the destruction of the world has to be read in light of 2 Peter 3:9, "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance."

God does hate sin, he does have wrath stored up, he does promise a day of judgment, he is jealous for his bride that both plays the whore and is gang-raped by the world. But God has chosen not to act unilaterally. Instead, God sends his people as ambassadors of reconciliation, he forms them to be able to bear his image of the world. That is an image, not of judgment, but of peacemaking reconciliation. This is the image Jonah had to reluctantly play, where the promise of total destruction was real, but so too was the offer of repentance. The message of God's judgment on the world is backed up with evidence, with the Flood, with Sodom, but God's message of judgment is also spoken through the rainbow.

Old Testament covenants come with threats. Those who make a covenant swear upon something precious to them that they will keep covenant, or they will lose what they value. Abraham makes his servant place his hand "under his thigh", a euphemism for his genitals, in a way that states that he will forsake his masculinity and offspring if he breaks troth.⁴¹ God and Abraham engage in a covenant that requires dividing many animals in half, also likely a symbol of being cut in half for unfaithfulness.⁴² So too, the covenant of the rainbow is itself a threat. It is a weapon of war pointed at heaven. Divine archery was well known in the Ancient Near East and in

³⁹ Mt 13:24-30.

⁴⁰ God is sovereign over people, but his sovereignty over his creation is withheld according to the logic Paul explores in Rom 8:20-21.

⁴¹ Gen 24:3.

⁴² Gen 15.

Greece. Plagues and lightning were both often described as arrows shot by the gods. So, if there is an arrow pointed up at heaven, it is, to translate it into modern terms, God pointing the gun of his judgment at himself, promising that he would rather have the trigger pulled on himself than to destroy his creation again.

The Wrong Side of the Rainbow

And so, of course, we see on the cross we see something like the bow of heaven released upon God. Rather than destroying his creation, God came to suffer the arrows of human evil. The judge came to be judged by those who claimed to be judges. God submitted to Babylon's execution. Whatever we think about the atonement, one thing is very clear in Paul's theology of the cross: it wasn't for Jesus to be on alone. Jesus himself commands his followers to take up their crosses (daily),⁴³ and that those who do not do so are not worthy of him.⁴⁴ Paul says that he is filling up what is lacking in Christ's sufferings.⁴⁵ We are crucified with Christ in order to die to sin and be rescued. Thus, we leave Babylon by means of carrying the cross with Jesus.⁴⁶ The cross is, for Paul, the very means by which God is reconciling former enemies. The instrument of reconciliation is God bearing the wrath of sinners, ironically, rather than pouring out his wrath on them. So, the cross is the inversion of the Flood. And rather than being Noah saved on a boat, we are called to go down into the flood waters to die (baptism). God asks us to be on the wrong side of the rainbow with him.

This is the path to maturity, to Christlikeness, to be the image of God that we are predestined to be conformed into.⁴⁷ The image of God is cruciform, and so we are to have the mind of Christ too, who did not consider the sin of Adam and Eve of aiming to be godlike a worthy goal, but emptied himself and made himself a servant.⁴⁸

Sin is defeated not by open combat, but by exposing it to open shame on the cross. Where Jesus was penetrated by nails and thorns, hung naked and

⁴³ Mt 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23

⁴⁴ Mt 10:38.

⁴⁵ Col 1:24.

⁴⁶ Rom 6:6; Gal 2:20, 6:14.

⁴⁷ Rom 8:29.

⁴⁸ Phil 2:6-8

exposed to be shamed in his agony, God is glorified. While not technically raped like the attempt on the angels of Sodom, Jesus was sexually humiliated nonetheless, as his exposed body was penetrated by the power of Rome. Jesus, in being stripped naked, is the grand reveal of the image of God to all history—naked without shame, without a mask.

And through the resurrection, Jesus is the firstborn of a great royal family, and we are called to be adopted into this family by means of becoming like Jesus, not through empty sacramental symbols, perfunctorily being baptized, but to live a cruciform life that is dead to the world and alive to God. This is how the resurrection is real in our time, through the body of Christ, his church, which bears his scars and participates in his suffering, bearing the burdens of others, but being mature enough to learn to master sin, to walk with God like Enoch, and to be ambassadors of reconciliation.

Do Not Judge... You Will Judge the World

Thus, the mission of the church of ambassadorship is to not judge. Jesus commands this,⁴⁹ Paul repeats this command.⁵⁰ We do not have the right to play God and condemn the world. This is because our job is to stand with God on the other side of the rainbow. Our job is to be God's voice calling to the world to repent.

And yet, we are also promised that we will one day judge the world and the angels.⁵¹ God will judge all things, and our job is to walk with Jesus, to be so conformed to his image, that we are presented mature enough to finally bear the image of God that Adam and Eve failed to do. We are then called to master Sin and judge it.

The job of the church in discipleship is not to condemn the world, but to prepare a people to be like Christ. Ephesians 4 is an oft-quoted passage about the church, but in the midst of talking about how God gave different kinds of people to serve the church, we must not miss that all of this is for the sake of presenting everyone mature, attaining to the “measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”⁵²

⁴⁹ Mt 7:1-2; Lk 6:37.

⁵⁰ Rom 2:1-3.

⁵¹ 1 Cor 6:2-3.

⁵² Eph 4:13. See also Col 1:28.

Resurrection and Sex

It is no secret that Jesus and Paul have no place for sex or marriage in the resurrection. Our previous discussion of Leviticus and some of the logic of OT sin makes sense of why they would teach this. If marriage is for life-giving and life-fostering, and the resurrection is all about abundant life, it follows that God is no longer mediating life through human families, but has brought the completion of his creation into reconciliation with the “author of life.”⁵³ In the presence of the true Father and in the midst of his family, there is no longer a need or desire for temporary pleasures or securing the livelihood of a household. The OT rationale for sex and marriage disappear in the resurrection. That does not make humans into asexual androgynous beings, nor does it condemn family or sex in this life. It simply goes to show that not only is there more to life than sex, life comes not from sex but from God, and one day being in the presence of the author of life is better by far than a thousand in the harem of Babylon,⁵⁴ or even just enjoying the “wife of your youth.”

Sex and the City of God

So, if Babylon is the “great whore” and sexual promiscuity is represented throughout the Bible as an expression of rebellion against God and domination by Sin, the church has a dual role. It first has to “come out of her.” The church should not allow herself to be penetrated by the world, and while this is sexual language, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Revelation made it abundantly clear that the graphic sexual language was designed not simply to shock, but to get to the very essence of what worldliness means. Commerce, politics, entertainment are all explicitly mentioned as part of playing the whore, and all of this is wrapped up in idolatry or wrong worship. Promiscuity is the cost of success in Babylon because the “mark of the beast” is really just allowing ourselves to be penetrated by the world, shaped by the world, loved by the world, used by the world, finding our calling and vocation in the world, which is the order of life-taking. There is no way to be “in the world but not of it” in that sense, for to be “in” it is to be united with its flesh, and so unite the body

⁵³ Acts 3:15.

⁵⁴ To riff on Ps 84:10.

of Christ with a prostitute, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6, which is worth quoting in conclusion (verses 12-20).

“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything. “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food,” and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, “The two shall be one flesh.” But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

We are the temple of God, together as a church. This temple language unites sexual immorality, idolatry, and worldly employment. As Paul will say in 2 Corinthians 6,

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God...

So how do we “shun fornication” and “come out of her?” How do we not be “unequally yoked” in a “partnership” with the world? We become ambassadors of Christ, which is what Paul has said just prior in 2 Corinthians 5.

This means we have to conceive of the church as a journey, as with our own spiritual lives in Christ. We are not just saved to eternal life and “become Christians.” We do not simply change our status. No, we follow the pattern of the people of God in Scripture. We, like Abraham, like Moses, leave the world to be formed as a people of God in wilderness. Yet, like Moses, and like Jesus, when mature we go back into the world and proclaim freedom to the captive.

Put another way, and as we’ll explore later, we need to reconceive of the church as simply a religious institution that hosts worship services and

understand it as a community of disciples who prepare one another for the kind of maturity it takes to be ambassadors operating in a foreign land.

The city of God is our destination, and it is a place without sex and without nakedness. We look forward to being clothed in white robes, not naked and ashamed, not naked in an orgy, nor using our clothing as a masked projection of how we want others to see us. We are to be clothed in Christ, and in this way will we find freedom to truly be both the image of God and the radically unique individuals God created us to be. For it is only in Christ that character replaces cosmetics and cosmization.

Part 1.2 Reformed and Theological Foundations

We believe that the Bible is best interpreted within a community—locally, globally, and throughout time. This helps reveal our own blind spots that come from our own cultural context, as well as showing how our history might predispose us to certain conclusions that might need to be reinvestigated. Tradition is not authoritative in the way that Scripture is and so it is not sought out as an authority, but as a guide in the way of wisdom.

At the same time, we use this section to push into new theological territory. The world asks new questions, and it is vital that we address them from our own theological perspective.

Chapter 5

A Presbyterian Catechetical and Confessional Survey

Rev. Dr. Troy Onsager

Introduction

With the publication of “Gender, Sex and the Kingdom,” our denomination is attempting to provide theological and pastoral guidance on some important topics that our culture, and accordingly, the church, is currently addressing. In the midst of this particular cultural moment, it is important that we reflect on the fact that the church has, in varying degrees, *been there before*. When we look at the Book of Acts and the Jerusalem council of chapter 15, the guidance of the apostles to important questions related to the requirements of Gentile converts covered much of what we are dealing with today:

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.¹

The basic guidance of ensuring that the church, in its ethical discussions, pay close attention to idolatry and sexual immorality has been a calling of the church from its inception. It is to take seriously God’s command in what the *Heidelberg Catechism* calls the “two tables” of the Ten Commandments: “The first table teaches us in four commandments how we ought to live in relation to God. The other table teaches us in six commandments what we owe to our neighbor.”² Idolatry falls firmly within the first table. Sexual immorality falls within the second, accompanied by the coveting, dishonesty and even the violent misconduct that sometimes accompanies these sins.

The early church was deeply devoted to speaking positively to the importance of the action of love within sexual purity in singleness and in

¹ Acts 15: 28-29, NIV.

² *ECO Confessional Standards*, 32.

marriage, such as in 2 Clement³ as well as Ignatius' letter to Polycarp.⁴ The *Didache*, in its discussion of the "Second Command of the Way of Life" writes thus:

2 The second commandment of the teaching is: You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not corrupt children; you shall not be sexually immoral.⁵

These early apostolic texts build upon the words of scripture in their practical advice to the church. The distinctiveness of the Christian, in fact, is related to the positive and sacrificial way they approach life, marriage and their community.⁶

This article is an attempt to look more deeply at a few Reformed confessions and catechisms, mostly prominently the *Heidelberg Catechism* and the *Westminster Confession*. Engagement will also be made with a few confessions that comprised the original *ECO Book of Confessions*, as they still correspond to theological grounding of the *Essential Tenets*, and were confessions that the *Essential Tenets* were drawn from. The confessions of faith of our tradition are the church's commentary on scripture, commentary that carries authority, but only a secondary authority to the priority of scripture.

Our denomination's publication of the *Confessional Standards 2020* do not include the accompanying scriptural references of the original confessions

³ 2 Clement 4:3: "So then, brothers and sisters, let us acknowledge him in our actions by loving one another, by not committing adultery or slandering one another or being jealous, but by being self-controlled, compassionate, and kind. And we ought to have sympathy for one another, and not be avaricious. By these actions let us acknowledge him, and not by their opposites." Michael W. Holmes and Joseph Barber Lightfoot, eds., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 143.

⁴ "Flee from wicked practices; better yet, preach a sermon about them. Tell my sisters to love the Lord and to be content with their husbands physically and spiritually. In the same way command my brothers in the name of Jesus Christ to love their wives as the Lord loves the church. If anyone is able to remain chaste to the honor of the flesh of the Lord, let him so remain without boasting. If he boasts he is lost; and if it becomes known to anyone other than the bishop he is ruined. And it is proper for men and women who marry to be united with the consent of the bishop, so that the marriage may be in accordance with the Lord and not due to lustful passions. Let all things be done for the honor of God." Holmes and Lightfoot, 267.

⁵ Holmes and Lightfoot, 347.

⁶ See "The Epistle to Diognetus" in Holmes and Lightfoot, 702. [esp. verses. 6-7]. See also the discussion of the early church in Fortson, *Unchanging Witness*, 27–36.

- particularly Heidelberg and Westminster. I will be addressing the original scripture cross references as well in this article, as they help us better understand the content and the purpose of particular confessional statements related to this discussion.

Creation & Gender

Creation & Gender - Scot's Confession

The Scot's Confession, in Chapter II, addresses "The Creation of Man."⁷ The confession acknowledges that the first man, Adam, was created "after [God's] own image and likeness, to whom he gave wisdom, lordship, justice, free will, and self-consciousness, so that in the whole nature of man no imperfection could be found."⁸ The reference to both man and woman follows in terms of the fall, where both are guilty of deception as well as "conspiring against the sovereign majesty of God," despite God's warnings against disobeying his instructions for them.⁹

The Scot's Confession, in chapter XXV, discusses "The Gifts Freely Given to the Kirk." In a remarkably pastoral tone, it notes that the first gift to the church is the forgiveness of sins through the righteous blood of Christ, where, by faith, the righteousness of Jesus Christ is given to the sinner. The second gift is the hope of the resurrection of the body, a resurrection that affirms a gendered resurrection of both men and women:

Secondly, in the general judgment, there shall be given to every man and woman resurrection of the flesh. The seas shall give up her dead, and the earth those who are buried within her. Yea, the Eternal, our God, shall stretch out his hand on the dust, and the dead shall arise incorruptible, and in the very substance of the selfsame flesh which every man now bears, to receive according to their works, glory or punishment.¹⁰

⁷ It is important to note that John Knox, the author of the Scot's Confession, has a number of concerning writings and actions related to the topic of gender. In particular, his broadside against the female monarchy in *First Blast against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* in 1558 shows him arguing theologically against female leadership in every aspect of social strata. See further, Matthew Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal*, 819-838. Matthew Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal: Retrieving the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church: An Intellectual and Theological History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2023), 819-38.

⁸ *ECO Book of Confessions* (2017), 16.

⁹ *ECO Book of Confessions* (2017), 16.

¹⁰ *ECO Book of Confessions* (2017), 30.

Both women and men shall be raised, at the judgment, *bodily* - in “the flesh.” In fact, providing even greater detail, the Scot’s Confession references the dead within the sea as well as the land, pointing to a resurrection of body that reconstitutes the “dust” of the dead *in the same way* that women and men presently exist as humans. This is no affirmation of the immortality of the soul, or the forms of platonic philosophy. This is women and men being raised from the dead *as women and men*, as persons - body and spirit.¹¹

For the Scots Confession, eternal separation from God is also experienced in both body and soul. For those confessing Christ, the promise of eternal life with God is experienced as well by body and soul, though in a changed way that is like Jesus’ “glorified body”:

But such as continue in well doing to the end, boldly confessing the Lord Jesus, shall receive glory, honor, and immortality, we constantly believe, to reign forever in life everlasting with Christ Jesus, to whose glorified body all his chosen shall be made like, when he shall appear again in judgment and shall render up the Kingdom to God his Father, who then shall be and ever shall remain, all in all things, God blessed forever. To whom, with the Son and the Holy Ghost, be all honor and glory, now and ever. Amen.¹²

The phrase, “Christ Jesus, to whose glorified body all his chosen shall be made like” is the important distinction in this paragraph. Women and men, in their resurrection will on the one hand be raised bodily of “the selfsame flesh which every man now bears,” yet also in a changed way where both women and men will be raised with a body “like” the “glorified body” that Jesus now embodies in his ascended state.¹³

In his own commentary on the Scot’s Confession (Chapter XXV), Karl Barth remarks on the importance of viewing this important confessional truth as the church’s hope:

This is the hope of the church. Jesus Christ alone is her hope, just as Jesus Christ alone is her comfort. We have, strictly speaking, absolutely no knowledge of the resurrection of the body and eternal life beyond what the Word of God tells us, and it tells us that Jesus Christ has arisen from the dead and lives eternally with God and that His resurrection and eternal life are our future also, because he is our Lord, the Lord of Creation and of our

¹¹ *ECO Book of Confessions* (2017), 30.

¹² *ECO Book of Confessions* (2017), 30.

¹³ *ECO Book of Confessions* (2017), 30.

whole existence, both our souls and bodies, and because we belong to Him and not to ourselves. But in knowing this we know enough. In Him the verdict on us has been not only given but put into effect. If His righteousness means resurrection from the dead and eternal life and if His righteousness is our righteousness, then what we have to await and what is revealed to us as our future can only be resurrection and eternal life.¹⁴

Creation & Gender - Second Helvetic Confession

The Second Helvetic confession specifically references Genesis 2 in its paragraph on creation (Chapter VII - Of the Creation of All Things: Of Angels, the Devil and Man). God created man in the goodness as well as the image of God and provided a wife for the man, in which the union of these two was “blessed” by God. Furthermore, the confession describes humans as those who have both an immortal soul and a mortal body, which constitutes, by both of these, “the whole man,” which by God’s will is not separated. Both body and soul exist in “life” and in “death” and will “abide forever” in the resurrection of the dead at the final judgment.¹⁵

Creation & Gender - Westminster Confession

The first section of chapter IV (Of Creation) details the creation of the “world, and all things therein whether visible or invisible.” The creation of humanity follows in the section, a particular creation distinct from all other created and living things:

After God had made all other creatures, **he created humans, male and female**, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness **after his own image**, having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfill it; and yet under a possibility of transgressing, being left to the liberty of their own will, which was subject to change.¹⁶

The creation of humanity as both male and female is connected directly to Genesis 1:27, which details both genders of male and female and grounds

¹⁴Karl Barth, J. L. M. Haire, and Ian Henderson, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God According to the Teaching of the Reformation, Recalling the Scottish Confession of 1560: The Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Aberdeen, in 1937 and 1938* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 221.

¹⁵ *ECO Book of Confessions* (2017), 89.

¹⁶ *ECO Confessional Standards* (2020), 47. Emphasis mine.

them in the theological category of *imago Dei*. The confession's naming of "after his own image" is drawn from Genesis 1:27, as well as from Colossians 3:10 and Ephesians 4:24. These two Pauline references describe the nature of the image of God in humanity as one entailing a *renewal* in the new creation we experience in Jesus Christ.¹⁷

The scriptural references also show that man and woman were created in God's image, and yet still bear that image, though in the brokenness and curse of sin. They can have that image renewed and restored, particularly in the "true righteousness and holiness" indicative of God, through faith in Jesus Christ. The restoration of the new self is a return to the creation of humanity in God's image with the endowment of "knowledge [Colossians 3:10], righteousness and true holiness [Ephesians 4:24]." ¹⁸

Clearly the Confession anticipates the further chapters that will address the Fall (VI), the Covenant (VII), and the Mediation of Christ (VIII). Yet, even in its confessional description of what the image of God is in humanity, it relates a New Testament promise of the renewal and restoration of the image of God in humanity which is broken by the power of sin. We cannot understand the *imago Dei* confessionally only in First Article terms (Creation), but we must also understand its damage (Fall), its restoration, and finally its ultimate redemption.¹⁹

Beth Felker Jones helpfully shows us the importance of an embodied creation and resurrection in her article "Embodied from Creation Through Redemption," where she writes:

Because of the Resurrection we are not free to imagine redemption apart from our very particular bodies. Salvation, both on the way and in glory is embodied. In their material life together, embodied creatures are redeemed in a way impossible for disembodied. Our embodied hope, which the Spirit

¹⁷ Chad B. Van Dixhoorn, ed., *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 192.

¹⁸ *ECO Confessional Standards* (2020), 47.

¹⁹ For additional reference, The Confession of 1967 affirms the gendered creation of male and female (287) as well the Brief Statement of Faith from 1983 (299). *Book of Confessions*: [Part 1 of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)]. Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2016.

grants to our embodied desire, must transform our present bodily practices.²⁰

Sex & Marriage

Singleness and Marriage - Second Helvetic Confession

Chapter XXIX of the *Second Helvetic Confession* (Of Celibacy, Marriage and the Management of Domestic Affairs) opens and closes with confessional guidance to the single person first. Certainly, within the backdrop of the confession is the confessional need to address the specific issue of clerical celibacy at the time of the Reformation. Yet, the content and tone of these confessional statements show little of the tenseness of the debate, but rather seek to provide clear guidance to the church on singleness and marriage. The pastoral tone to both is quite evident in this section. The confession first addresses single persons who, in the word of Paul from 1 Corinthians 7 are to be encouraged and supported in their “calling, as long as they feel endued with that divine gift; and let them not lift up themselves above others, but let them serve the Lord continuously in simplicity and humility.”²¹ The single person has greater freedom to attend to the calling of the Lord away from the responsibilities of the family, and, as Paul commends, the calling of the single person is to be honored and respected.

The confession recognizes the strong reality of sexual desire, and as such commends marriage to those desiring the companionship of a spouse and the beauty of sexual expression within marriage. Sex is considered to be confined to the marriage vows, and the confession is direct in condemning the sexual exploits of single persons outside the covenant bonds of marriage: “We also detest an impure single life, the secret and open lusts and fornications of hypocrites pretending to be continent when they are the most incontinent of all. All these God will judge.”²²

The confession’s affirmation of marriage draws upon the words of Jesus in Matthew 19: “[Jesus] willed man and woman to cleave one to the other inseparably, and to live together in complete love and concord.”²³ An appeal is

²⁰ Gerald Hiestand and Todd A. Wilson, eds., *Beauty, Order, and Mystery: A Christian Vision of Human Sexuality* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 28.

²¹ *ECO Book of Confessions* (2017), 143.

²² *ECO Book of Confessions* (2017), 144. See also Fortson, *Unchanging Witness*, 83.

²³ *ECO Book of Confessions* (2017), 143.

made as well to Hebrews 13:4, with the admonition for the purity of the marriage bed. The reference is indicative of the beauty of sex as designed by God within the covenant of marriage, signifying that outside of this covenant sexuality activity is, in fact, sinful (with additional reference made to 1 Corinthians 7:28). The confession “condemn[s] polygamy, and those who condemn second marriages.”²⁴ This interesting juxtaposition shows both the errors of a libertine attitude to sex as well as restrictive one (forbidding a second marriage with, in essence, the demand of chastity in the aftermath of a spouse’s death, abandonment, etc.).

The confession looks to the church to help strengthen the bonds of marriage, including a “Matrimonial Forum” set up by the church to “care for marriages” and discourage “unchastity” and other actions that cause “matrimonial disputes.”²⁵ Whether such forums, consisting of “holy judges” were helpful or detrimental in practice is worthy of discussion.²⁶ However, the heart of the confession is still directed toward the church helping those in marriage in the local congregation, guiding them in their call to raise children,²⁷ and helping them to avoid marital division—particularly with respect to relational discord and sexual unfaithfulness:

Let marriages be made with consent of the parents, or of those who take the place of parents, and above all for that purpose for which the Lord instituted marriages. Moreover, let them be kept holy with the utmost faithfulness, piety, love and purity of those joined together. Therefore let them guard against quarrels, dissensions, lust and adultery.²⁸

²⁴ *ECO Book of Confessions* (2017), 144.

²⁵ *ECO Book of Confessions* (2017), 144.

²⁶ For further reading, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 237–39.

²⁷ “THE REARING OF CHILDREN. Children are to be brought up by the parents in the fear of the Lord; and parents are to provide for their children, remembering the saying of the apostle: “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8). But especially they should teach their children honest trades or professions by which they may support themselves. They should keep them from idleness and in all these things instill in them true faith in God, lest through a lack of confidence or too much security or filthy greed they become dissolute and achieve no success.” *ECO Book of Confessions* (2017), 144.

²⁸ *ECO Book of Confessions* (2017), 144.

The Second Helvetic Confession is a positive and biblical call to both single people and married people in the life of the church, though unafraid to name the pernicious reality of sexual sin for *both* single people as well as married people.

Marriage and Divorce - Westminster Confession

Chapter XXIV of the 1646 Westminster Confession (Of Marriage and Divorce) is one of the few chapters to receive a revision and expansion in the American editions of the confession.²⁹ In the 1950s both branches of the mainline Presbyterian church revised Chapter XXIV to deal, more specifically, with an expanding understanding of the grounds of divorce. Interestingly, though, both revisions changed the first confessional statement of this chapter.

Comparing the three opening statements of the chapter “Of Marriage and Divorce”:

1647 Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter XXIV)

1. **Marriage is to be between one man and one woman:** neither is it lawful for any man to have more than one wife, nor for any woman to have more than one husband, at the same time.³⁰

1959 UPCUSA Revision (Chapter XXIV)³¹

²⁹ In 1903, The Presbyterian Church in the North added two chapters — “Of the Holy Spirit” [Chapter IX] and “Of the Love of God and Missions” [Chapter X]. The Presbyterian Church in the South added the same chapters in 1942 Nathan Feldmeth, *Reformed and Evangelical across Four Centuries: The Presbyterian Story in America* (Chicago: Eerdmans, 2022), 392. This addition to the Westminster Confession explains the differences in the numbering of chapters in various American Presbyterian traditions. ECO’s printed confessional standard includes both of these chapters. *ECO Confessional Standards* (2020), 51-21.

³⁰ Van Dixhoorn, *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms*, 223.

³¹ ECO, in its Confessional Standards 2020, follows the 1959 UPCUSA Revision on this particular chapter, though it follows the numbering of the PCUS edition. This is a helpful explanation from the ECO Confessional Standards: “The text of the Confession and Catechisms as found in the ECO Confessional Standards (2020) reflects various amendments made in the course of American Presbyterian history. The three most significant amendments to the Confession are the revisions of 1788 concerning the civil government’s relationship to the church, the amendments of 1903, which included the addition of new chapters on the Holy Spirit and Missions, and the 1958 replacement of chapter 24 with a new statement on

1. Christian marriage is an institution ordained of God, blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ, established and sanctified for the happiness and welfare of mankind, into which **spiritual and physical union one man and one woman enter**, cherishing a mutual esteem and love, bearing with each other's infirmities and weaknesses, comforting each other in trouble, providing in honesty and industry for each other and for their household, praying for each other, and living together the length of their days as heirs of the grace of life.³²

1953 PCUS Revision [Chapter XXVI]³³

1. Marriage is a union between one man and one woman, designed of God to last so long as they both shall live.³⁴

All three texts specify the gender of the two persons engaged in marriage - one man and one woman. The argument against polygamy is certainly implied within this confessional statement, as well as restricting the covenant of marriage to one man and one woman. The original Westminster text does not deem it necessary to define what marriage is other than to specify that marriage is between "one man and one woman." The PCUS adds that marriage is a "union" while UPCUSA describes it as in "institution." The PCUS revision additionally describes marriage as a union "designed by God," while the UPCUSA revision states that marriage is "ordained of God."

When the discussion turns to the grounds for divorce, only the original 1647 text references "adultery," and it does so three times.³⁵ The PCUS

marriage and divorce. The version presented here represents an update that ECO's theology teams made to the 1958 edition of the UPCUSA. Note especially that the additional chapters on the Holy Spirit and Missions are inserted as chapters IX and X, thus changing subsequent chapter numbers. So, although the starting text represents the UPCUSA version, the numbering reflects the PCUS version." (*ECO Confessional Standards* (2020), 41-42)

³² *ECO Book of Confessions* (2017), 177.

³³ The EPC adopted the PCUS revision as well in 1984 with their own slight revision related to divorce. The EPC deleted the sentence: "so that marriage dies at the heart and the union becomes intolerable" from the PCUS paragraph 5 regarding the grounds for divorce. *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms: Evangelical Presbyterian Church* (2010), 42-43.

³⁴ *ECO Book of Confessions* (2017), 178.

³⁵ Van Dixhoorn, *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms*, 223-24.

revision expands the concept to a larger understanding of “irremediable unfaithfulness:”

“only in cases of extreme, unrepented-of, and irremediable unfaithfulness (physical or spiritual) should separation or divorce be considered. Such separation or divorce is accepted as permissible only because of the failure of one or both of the partners, and does not lessen in any way the divine intention for indissoluble union.”³⁶

“Unfaithfulness” in this definition includes adultery (i.e. physical), as well as “spiritual” unfaithfulness - a description open to a variety of considerations.

The UPCUSA revision, which ECO follows, only implies the acceptable grounds of divorce, referencing the “guilt of those whose marriage has been broken,” where a divorce has been “granted on grounds explicitly stated in Scripture or implicit in the gospel of Christ.”³⁷ All three revisions include the possibility of remarriage following divorce. The original 1647 texts allows remarriage following adultery and, with a generous reading of section 6, “willful desertion.”³⁸ The PCUS and the UPCUSA versions allow for a wider reading of possibilities for marriage in terms of Christ’s “redemptive gospel.”³⁹

The Westminster Confession is clear that the covenant of marriage is between one man and one woman. Debates in the Presbyterian world over the ordination and marriages of same sex persons has, interestingly, been conducted over the matters of polity and not confessional grounding. The mode of the political machinations was to make a change in relation to *polity* without a corresponding change to a confessional statement. The implicit nature of this course of action was that the confession itself is not the binding and grounding document of the church’s ministry but rather its own polity documents.⁴⁰

Certainly there is a sense in which there has a desire to avoid a fight of confessional *revision*, particularly with one of the most celebrated confessional documents of the Reformed confessional world. However, it still begs the question as to the degree to which a body is *confessional* when a statement of

³⁶ ECO *Book of Confessions* (2017), 179-180.

³⁷ ECO *Confessional Standards* (2020), 64.

³⁸ Van Dixhoorn, *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms*, 224.

³⁹ ECO *Confessional Standards* (2020), 64. ECO *Book of Confessions* (2017), 178.

⁴⁰ See discussion in Feldmeth, *Reformed and Evangelical across Four Centuries*, 311–14.

polity is not also grounded in what the church *confesses* to be true from scripture. To be confessionally reformed is to hold to a confession of faith. To date, there has not been a revision of chapter XXIV [Marriage and Divorce] to change the wording of marriage as a union between “one man and one woman,” despite denominations on both sides of this debate holding to the confessional standard of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Our own denomination affirms the original wording of the Westminster Confession for its understanding of marriage.

Sexual Sin

Most of the confessional entries related to sexual sin are found within the explication and application of the seventh commandment.

Heidelberg Catechism - The Seventh Commandment

As is consistent with the internal structure of the Heidelberg Catechism, a theological understanding of a portion of scripture is followed by an expansion of the intent of the command. The catechism understands the importance of the ethical expansion of Jesus, particularly in the sermon on the mount, that merely following the letter of the law does not allow one to depart from the heart of the law. For example, the Heidelberg explains clearly what is meant by the seventh command against adultery:

What does the seventh commandment teach us? That all sexual immorality is condemned by God, and that we should therefore detest it from the heart, and live chaste and disciplined lives, whether in holy wedlock or in single life.⁴¹

Lev. 18:30; Eph. 5:3–5; Jude 22–23; 1 Cor. 7:1–9; 1 Thess. 4:3–8; Heb. 13:4.⁴²

Sexual sin in the form of adultery is an act that *both* married and single persons must avoid. To that end, the avoidance of the *act* must start with a desire to “detest it from the heart.” The first scriptural reference to this confessional statement is to Leviticus 18:30. Leviticus 18 an entire chapter devoted to the avoidance of unlawful sexual practices, including sexual

⁴¹ *ECO Confessional Standards* (2020), 34.

⁴² Van Dixhoorn, *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms*, 325.

relations with family members, adultery, and homosexual sex. Lev. 18:30 (NIV) sums up the chapter with the statement: “Keep my requirements and do not follow any of the detestable customs that were practiced before you came and do not defile yourselves with them. I am the Lord your God.” The majority of the remaining scriptural references encourage the avoidance of various forms of sexual immorality among both single persons and married persons (Eph. 5:3-5; Thess. 4:3-8), desiring that both singleness and marriage be marked by sexual purity (1 Cor. 7:1-9; Heb. 13:4).

Yet, lest one merely stop with this definition, the catechism expands upon this initial statement in the direction of a full understanding of the matrix of sexual desires that require attention:

Does God forbid nothing more than adultery and such gross sins in this commandment? Since both our body and soul are a temple of the Holy Spirit, it is his will that we keep both pure and holy. Therefore he forbids all sexually immoral actions, gestures, words, thoughts, desires and whatever may excite another person to them.⁴³

Matt. 5:27-29; 1 Cor. 6:18-20; Eph. 5:3-4 b 1 Cor. 15:33; Eph. 5:18⁴⁴

The Matthew reference points to the adultery of the heart, where the believer is to pay attention to what they allow their eyes to see (Matt. 5:27-29). The 1 Corinthians’ reference shows the importance of understanding that a person’s body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and therefore sexual sin should be not only avoided but run away from (1 Cor. 6:18-20). Therefore avoid those with bad character - particularly in the midst of bad company encouraging sexual sins or engaging in behaviors that may encourage it, such as drunkenness (1 Cor. 15:33; Eph. 5:18).

Heidelberg Catechism - Unrepentance and Sexual Sin

There is quite an interesting history in modern American Presbyterian debates surrounding question 87 of the Heidelberg Catechism. The 1962 English translation by Arthur Miller and Eugene Osterhaven substitutes the New English Bible text of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 into the space where the original authors of the catechism, Zacharias Ursinus and Kaspar Olevianus,

⁴³ *ECO Confessional Standards* (2020), 34.

⁴⁴ Van Dixhoorn, *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms*, 325.

denote what “Scripture tell us.” The first textual reference that follows Question 87 is from 1 Cor. 6:9-10.

1962 translation

87. Can those who do not turn to God from their ungrateful, impenitent life be saved?

Certainly not! Scripture says, “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”⁴⁵

New translation⁴⁶

87. Can those be saved who do not turn to God from their ungrateful and unrepentant ways?

By no means. Scripture tells us that no unchaste person, no idolater, adulterer, thief, no covetous person, no drunkard, slanderer, robber, or the like will inherit the kingdom of God.⁴⁷

1 Cor. 6:9–10; Gal. 5:19–21; Eph. 5:1–20; 1 John 3:14⁴⁸

The new translation does more accurately reflect the original German, and is used by both the PCUSA in their book of Confessions as well as the Christian Reformed Church in North America.⁴⁹ Both of these denominations have differing views of whether or not same sex relations are sinful and contrary to God’s design for human sexuality.

Regardless, Question 87 references 1 Cor. 6:9-10 which clearly describes a variety of sexual sins requiring repentance, including homosexual sex. It is unsurprising that a catechism directed towards the theological

⁴⁵ *PCUSA Book of Confessions: Study Edition* (1996), 73.

⁴⁶ Approved by the 220th PCUSA General Assembly in 2012 and ratified by the presbyteries in 2013. See also Fortson, *Unchanging Witness*, 155–57.

⁴⁷ *PCUSA Book of Confessions* (2016).

⁴⁸ Van Dixhoorn, *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms*, 318. Interestingly, the new edition only references: 1 Cor. 6:9–10; Eph. 5:5–6; 1 John 3:14, a departure from the original references.

⁴⁹ *PCUSA Book of Confessions* (2016), and *Our Faith: Ecumenical Creeds, Reformed Confessions and other Resources* (2013).

education of the family would not reference all of these sins in catechetical form—collapsing them into but a few—while clearly referencing the warning of unrepentance from 1 Cor. 6:9-10. The reference to Gal. 5:19-21 concerns the acts of the flesh which include sexual sin: “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery . . . orgies.” Eph. 5 is again an important reference for the catechism, where the avoidance of “sexual immorality” is part of the way of love for the believer in Christ who no longer lives in darkness but is called to “live as children of light.”

Care and nuance with respect to the pastoral application of these warning lists of Paul is required, but the catechism understands the depths of sexual sin, expressed in quite a wide arrange of sexually prohibited acts as well as the health of the heart with respect to its sexual desires.

Westminster Larger Catechism - Seventh Commandment

Questions 137-139 in the Westminster Larger Catechism provide an expanded understanding of sexual sin, which should be a guide for us against collapsing sexual sin into a few categories of importance to God. The Larger Catechism looks at the seventh commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery” as a command that requires “duties of us” as we seek to follow it, as well as the explication of the wide variety of “sins” that we are called to avoid. Much like we witnessed with the Heidelberg Catechism, lest the reader assume that the seventh command is primarily directed toward avoiding unchastity within marriage, the Larger Catechism displays remarkable breadth with respect to how the “other” is treated with respect to sexual sin.

138 - What are the duties required in the Seventh Commandment? The duties required in the Seventh Commandment are: chastity in body, mind, affections, words, and behavior, and the preservation of it in ourselves and others; watchfulness over the eyes and all the senses; temperance, keeping of chaste company, modesty in apparel, marriage by those that have not the gift of continence, conjugal love, and cohabitation; diligent labor in our callings; shunning of all occasions of uncleanness, and resisting temptations.⁵⁰

The Catechism here has in mind the health of the heart as well as the body, a desire to love one’s neighbor in both one’s actions as well as their

⁵⁰ *Confessional Standards*, 108.

desires. The response even references the “eyes,” reminding us of Job’s desire to make a covenant with his eyes lest he lust after another. The temptations to sexual sin are so wide and varied that the Christian is to be careful about the company they keep that would likely exacerbate these temptations. A commitment to pursue relationships with friends who would help us in “resisting temptations” in this regard would be wise counsel indeed. Failing to follow these duties, the Catechism clearly states, is itself an act of sinful behavior:

139 - What are the sins forbidden in the Seventh Commandment? The sins forbidden in the Seventh Commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required, are: adultery, fornication, rape, incest, sodomy, and all unnatural lusts; all unclean imaginations, thoughts, purposes, and affections; all corrupt or filthy communications, or exposure to them; wanton looks, impudent or light behavior, immodest apparel, prohibiting of lawful, and dispensing with unlawful marriages; allowing, tolerating, keeping of brothels, and resorting to them; entangling vows of single life, undue delay of marriage; having more wives or husbands than one at the same time; unjust divorce or desertion; idleness, gluttony, drunkenness, unchaste company; lascivious songs, books, pictures, dancing, theater plays, and all other provocations to, or acts of, uncleanness either in ourselves or others.

The sheer number of sins listed in question 139, shows both the biblical breadth of sexual sin and the damage that sexual sin has on everyone in the community. The scriptural references to this question are numerous, virtually cross-referencing every section of each sentence.⁵¹ Similar scriptural

⁵¹ Here is the original text of Q 139, which scriptural references below.

What are the sins forbidden in the seventh commandment? The sins forbidden in the seventh commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required,^a are, adultery, fornication,^b rape, incest,^c sodomy, and all unnatural lusts;^d all unclean imaginations, thoughts, purposes, and affections;^e all corrupt or filthy communications, or listening thereunto;^f wanton looks,^g impudent or light behavior, immodest apparel;^h prohibiting of lawful,ⁱ and dispensing with unlawful marriages;^j allowing, tolerating, keeping of stews, and resorting to them;^k entangling vows of single life,^l undue delay of marriage,^m having more wives or husbands than one at the same time;ⁿ unjust divorce,^o or desertion;^p idleness, gluttony, drunkenness,^q unchaste company;^r lascivious songs, books, pictures, dancings, stage plays;^s and all other provocations to, or acts of uncleanness, either in ourselves or others.^t

references of the Heidelberg Catechism appear in this list.

Infidelity within marriage, promiscuous sex outside of marriage, the violent act of forced sex, the sexual abuse of one within the family, the practice of homosexual sex are all named as departures from God's design for human sexuality.⁵² Jesus' teaching on the Sermon on the Mount about looking upon another *for the purpose of lust* is well stated by this question, as it focuses on the "imaginings, thoughts, purposes, and affections" of one in violation of the seventh commandment.

Particularly interesting is the reference to "communications" that are sexually vile or explicit would still be particularly *apropos* to our social media culture today. The sending of sexually explicit material, including that of minors, and the sexually explicit communications within digital apps that hide one's intentions from others to see are actions that violate this commandment.

The catechism's reference to "brothels" also bears large now in the midst of human trafficking, particularly for the purposes of meeting the marketable appetite for sex. The Christian's understanding of the creation of men and women in the image of God requires them to vociferously oppose attempts in "allowing, tolerating, keeping of brothels, and resorting to them." With respect to marriage, polygamy is prohibited, as well as "unjust divorce or desertion."

Finally, recognizing the dangerous temptations of pornography and the various forms of media that peddle it is imperative to avoid what Jesus references as adultery of the heart. It's not particularly difficult to see the modern parallels to what the Catechism refers to as the means of sexual temptation for their day.

a Prov. 5:7; Prov. 4:23, 27 b Heb. 13:4; Eph. 5:5; Gal. 5:19 c 2 Sam. 13:14; 1 Cor. 5:1; Mark 6:18 d Rom. 1:24, 26–27; Lev. 20:15–16 e Matt. 5:28; Matt. 15:19; Col. 3:5 f Eph. 5:3–4; Prov. 7:5, 21–22 g Isa. 3:16; 2 Pet. 2:14 h Prov. 7:10, 13 i 1 Tim. 4:3 j Mark 6:18; Mal. 2:11–12; Lev. 18:1–21 k 1 Kings 15:12; 2 Kings 23:7; Lev. 19:29; Jer. 5:7; Deut. 23:17–18; Prov. 7:24–27 l Matt. 19:10–11 m 1 Cor. 7:7–9; Gen. 38:26 n Mal. 2:14–15; Matt. 19:5 o Mal. 2:16; Matt. 5:32; Matt. 19:8–9 p 1 Cor. 7:12–13 q Ezek. 16:49; Prov. 23:30–33 r Gen. 39:19; Prov. 5:8 s Eph. 5:4; Rom. 13:13; 1 Pet. 4:3; Ezek. 23:14–16; Isa. 3:16; Isa. 23:15–17; Mark 6:22 t 2 Kings 9:30; Jer. 4:30; Ezek. 23:40

Van Dixhoorn, *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms*, 383–84.

⁵² One of the references here is to Rom. 1:24, 26–27.

Conclusion

This brief survey leads us to the confessional statement of ECO's Essential Tenets, in the final section "E. Living in obedience to the Word of God." It is an explication of the Ten Commandments, with a more contemporary wording. The explication of the seventh commandment is essentially a distillation of the confessional references of this survey:

7. maintain chastity in thought and deed, being faithful within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman as established by God at the creation or embracing a celibate life as established by Jesus in the new covenant.⁵³

All people are asked to pursue holiness with their minds and bodies—sexual immorality is multi-varied, not reducible to a few behaviors. Therefore believers must, with humility and vigilance, seek to be led by the Holy Spirit to follow God's design for human sexuality. The doctrine of creation establishes the blessing of marriage—one man and one woman—to which each spouse's fidelity and love is required. The "new covenant" established by Jesus enables the single person to shun sexual immorality and be an ambassador for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Former President of Fuller Theological Seminary, Richard Mouw, acknowledges that the present moment is an exposure of a deficient "catechesis" on the subject of gender and sex in the church, as well as the academy—particularly the seminaries. He writes: "A *catechesis* for sexuality is a crucial requirement today. . . . The church would greatly help . . . parents who are anxious [about these issues] by offering a course in 'raising our children in a sexually confusing culture.'"⁵⁴ For Mouw, this needs to come from "pastor theologians"⁵⁵ as well as a much needed development of what he calls "episcopal guidance."⁵⁶ What he means by this is, of course, denominational or trans-denominational "pastoral guidelines from a more disciplined, theologically informed source" to help the church address the difficult

⁵³ *ECO Constitution: Essential Tenets, Polity & Rules of Discipline* (2022), 8.

⁵⁴ Hiestand and Wilson, *Beauty, Order, and Mystery*, 64.

⁵⁵ Hiestand and Wilson, 66.

⁵⁶ Hiestand and Wilson, 68–69.

circumstances that emerge on the issue of gender and sex.⁵⁷ ECO's document of *Gender, Sex and the Kingdom*, is a helpful step in that direction. Let us also remember that this work, though scripturally grounded, is *confessionally* supported as well as we seek to bear witness to the "redemptive gospel."⁵⁸

⁵⁷ See also Trueman, Carl R. Trueman, *Crisis of Confidence: Reclaiming the Historic Faith in a Culture Consumed with Individualism and Identity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2024), 143–70. Reference to Chapter XXIV of Westminster if made on page 155 in a section entitled "A Thorough Confession Provides Moral Guidance in an Age of Moral Confusion."

⁵⁸ For further reading on the confessional foundations of the Reformed Tradition see Troy J. Onsager, *One Church in Christ: The Confessional Foundations of Ecclesiastical Unity in Karl Barth 1921–38*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series, v. 249 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2023).

Chapter 6

Growing Up into Christ—A Theology from Eros to Agape

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

In this chapter we attempt to summarize a biblical theology as it encounters the world and leads us toward a lived theology of love in all forms of human relationships, not just sexual ones. I will present eros as both a natural and sinful way of understanding love, and counter it with the Jesus-shaped agape. We will find that, rather than having God-ordained institutions that legitimize the expression of eros (i.e. marriage), all relationships are called to be submitted to the logic of Christ and his church, which is agapeic in shape. This topic has been covered by other writers in more academic depth, for example Anders Nygren's magisterial *Agape and Eros* originally published in 1932 and 1938. He gives a detailed history of the ideas from ancient times to the Reformation. My aim here is to be somewhat general in a way that can bear clear pastoral and leadership fruit. How do we transform *eros* into *agape*? How do we move from self-love to love of others?

Love and Desire

What do we do with our natural passions, those desires that we feel, that arise within us sometimes even against the strongest protestations of our minds? Do we celebrate them and let them run free, or do we try to contain or control them? This is an age-old problem and one that philosophers of all stripes have considered. English language still bears the fruit of these conversations. "Passion" comes from the Greek "to suffer" because they are feelings that work on us, rather than us controlling them. We are the "patients" (ones who undergo/suffer something) rather than the actors of our passions, at least on the Greek view. But the Bible is very familiar with discussions of desire too. The very first mention of "sin" in the Bible comes with this notion of a powerful personified desire seeking to devour Cain that he must master.¹ Paul says that the fruit of the Holy Spirit includes "self-control" and not being ruled

¹ Gen 4:7.

by passions.² But before we dive into a deeper theology of desire, let's consider a bit of Christian theological background.

Christians have not been consistent on how we engage with the question of human desire. Some will have it that desire is bad and should be eliminated, a view that accords both with Buddhism and with some of the more extreme forms of ascetic and monastic theology.³ We might call this "apathy" from the Greek *apatheia* (to not suffer). Others will have it that desire is good, but only becomes bad when wrongly ordered. According to this view, it's really a question of priority. This view is clearly expressed by figures like John Piper's "Christian Hedonism." We might think that it's what the Westminster Catechisms propose as well under its first question, "What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and *enjoy* him forever." For others, desire is a good rightly expressed when it is rooted in the authentic self, and the goal of spirituality is to liberate the authentic self from the chains of oppressive social demands and stereotypes. On this view, the self is a desiring-self held back by the sins of others.

In essence, all of these discussions are models of political theory and accord with political visions of the good. A Hobbesian view, that "nature" is "red in tooth and claw" and must be transformed through civilizational methods is a classic *Chaoskampf* (war against chaos) view prevalent in most ancient mythology. That is, we need to cultivate raw nature into cooked forms through things like law and education. Desire should be cultivated, reordered, and controlled to attain the good. This represents Plato's vision not only of the self, but of the state as well, and has been immensely influential in the development of "Western Civilization." A Rousseauian view would have it that "man is born free but everywhere is in chains" and that the natural needs to be liberated from the bonds of oppressive civilizational forms. This view seeks to liberate people from structures of power and control, to find their authentic selves by following their own paths without undue influence of others. Nietzsche expresses this dichotomy through a contrast of Apollo (reason) and Dionysus (desire/life) in *The Birth of Tragedy*. For him, the problem with Greek philosophy and Christianity is that they have kept people down,

² Cf. Rom 6:12, 7:5; 1 Cor 5:24; Eph 2:3.

³ Famous examples, like Origen's self-castration take the purgation of desire by removal of physical members to the highest degree. Monastic orders that took vows of chastity, poverty, copious fasting, and other rigorous disciplines show this well.

norming them into a herd by sucking the life out of them. True life is expressed in freedom to live out our desire, not to repress it in civilized forms. These ideas have come to the fore through psychology, notably in Freud and others, for whom disentangling the self from other relationships, like that of the father and mother, is the best way to find oneself and become integrated. There's nuance within these views, but it's ultimately a picture of how we engage the natural world as expressed in our own bodies. And this is part of the root question of politics and sexuality. What do we do with our bodies? *Become* good through control or *be* good by liberating nature?

The answer, for Christians, is to make this dichotomy false. Traditional theological language of “the fall” attempts to do this by identifying nature as good but “fallen” or “broken” with the counterpoint that what is fallen can be redeemed, or fixed. The challenge with this language is that it does not fit the NT's vision of sexuality. However good created sexuality is, the vision of new creation and resurrection isn't for a “fixed” or “redeemed” sexuality, but a different order of things. The Bible is not a story of *recovery* or *fixing*, but of new creation and resurrection.⁴ Thus, I will argue that eros, desire, is not good or bad in itself but is instrumental in forming good or bad relationships. God has created people for “maturity” and the right relation between them and other people and things is vital to obtain that maturity. So, desire isn't perfected, as in the vision of liberation. Rather, desire is transformed through death and resurrection into something new— *agape*. Eros dies on the cross and rises as *agape*.

Let's explore the journey as we consider a kingdom-shaped understanding of love as a kind of relationship.

Love as Relationship, Not Thing

Especially in our highly technicized world where we constantly focus on methods, metrics, and means to get things done, love tends to be viewed as a thing or a mechanism. But as the old DC Talk song goes, “Love is a verb.” When we consider love as a noun, we can dissociate love from the relationships involved. Love as a noun, as a thing, becomes an “other” that we have to have a relationship with. Our relationship with the “crazy little thing called love”

⁴ Here I strongly disagree with NT Wright's eschatology which is for renewal of creation rather than resurrection of creation.

makes love into a power that we either master or it masters us. So, we “fall” into it as a passion. And thus, we have already begun making love about me, about the self, and how the self is going to be constructed in relationship, not with other people, but in relation to love as a thing. This makes love, ironically, entirely subjective and selfish. Once we think of love as a thing, we have already begun instrumentalizing other people to craft the self, and thus undermine what we’ll see as the very definition of biblical love. We might say the same for gender and sex. These are not things in themselves to instrumentalize other people to obtain. Rather, gender and sex are descriptors of human relationships.

Verbs require a subject and an object. And when “love” becomes a subject or object in our sentence of life, other people become relative clauses. “I fell in love with her” makes “her” entirely unnecessary for the basic meaning of the main clause, “I fell in love.” The “with her” is ancillary and instrumental. The grammar of our stories of meaning exposes our beliefs and our power structures. “I fell in love” is a passive notion. “Love” worked upon me, and I succumbed as a victim. I gave up responsibility. I act as though I had no choice. This kind of love is a rapist, and liberating this passion is nothing but a form of Stockholm Syndrome where we end up defining ourselves by our oppressive captors. And that means *I* didn’t instrumentalize *her*, “love” did and “made a fool of us all.” Transforming love into a noun transforms love into an idol, into Aphrodite, Eros, Cupid, and we are struck by arrows, slain in our spirits by an overpowering passion. We become possessed.

But, if we make love the verb, it requires two people as subject and object. It requires that we take responsibility for the action of love as an action done to or for the other person. Transforming love into a verb unmasks the power of Cupid and demythologizes him and his arrows. We bear full responsibility for our actions and our feelings, and what works upon us is no longer a personified power, but hormones, chemistry, and other natural bodily functions designed in humans as in other mammals, to facilitate reproduction. This desire is *eros*. But love, as a verb, is *agape*. Eros is expressed in surrender to animal urges. Agape is expressed responsible, adult action-in-relation.

So, we can begin to see how a biblical theology challenges the old political theory debate between control and liberation. What we’re really talking about here are two different things: the passions, and the act of love. The sleight of hand that has happened since time immemorial is the

equivocation of passion with love. Love is responsible choice. Love is freedom. Passion is passive submission. It is control and domination. Love needs no master, but passion is either master or slave. Love creates equality, passion creates submission. There is a time for everything with our passions,⁵ time to express them, and time to control them. To build a whole philosophy or political vision on either control or release is a vast oversimplification of human life and leads us toward hierarchical political and gender institutions.

Natural Eros

With that, let's describe the natural form of relationship, something quite animal, and that is *desire*. And here we'll use the Greek *eros* to refer to desire, understanding that personifying desire or making it a noun is part of the problem that we'll get to. As we'll talk about *eros* and desire here it is important to understand that *eros* is not just about sexual desire, but about any form of natural desire. This can include food or consumer goods. We can "lust" after a car, for example. Lusting after a car is a form of submission to passion in which we divest ourselves of responsibility and become a "fanatic" or a "car guy" thus defining ourselves by what passions we succumb to.

Eros is the desire to find oneself in someone or something else, to have a need satisfied, to fill up something lacking. It is the desire to consume or be consumed, to unite or be united, to identify and come together. This desire is a kind of hunger to satisfy. This is something humans share with other creatures. In animals we easily identify erotic desire as instinctual, and we often denigrate the animal experience as beneath the human, as though animals are *subject to* instinctual desire. That is, they are often portrayed as *slaves* to their instinct because they do not seem to have a *will* that can resist desire or transform it to higher ends, a notion that goes back at least to Aristotle. Whether this is true of animal experience is probably impossible to know. It is also worth stating that some thinkers would characterize humans in the same way, that we are all essentially predetermined and *will*, or the experience of choice, is a result of brain chemistry rather than some external force with actual agency.⁶ In any case, what we might characterize as *eros* is a relationship between the self and something or someone else that sees in the other a

⁵ Eccl 3.

⁶ See works by philosophers Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Robert Sapolsky.

satisfaction to the desire present in the person. Eros instrumentalizes the other to satisfy internal “needs”.

At the heart of eros is not sex, then, but consuming desire. And that means eros is expressed in consumeristic desire that blurs the line (often intentionally through “sex appeal”) between sex and consumption. The Rolling Stones said it in their famous song from 1965, “Satisfaction.” There the blurring of lines between sex appeal, gender identity, products, and marketing was made very clear:

When I'm watchin' my TV
 And a man comes on to tell me
 How white my shirts can be
 But he can't be a man 'cause he doesn't smoke
 The same cigarettes as me
 ...
 I can't get no satisfaction
 I can't get no girl reaction

The premise of the song and the culture it expresses is that the promise of satisfaction that comes through tuning into mass media (joining the mass movement, identifying with broad culture), wearing particular kinds of clothes to present oneself in a certain way (white shirts) according to a gender stereotype (brand of cigarettes), with the hope of getting “girl reaction” or in another place in the song “I’m trying to make some girl.”

So, even our concept of “romantic” love could be interpreted as merely so much mythologizing and ritualizing reproductive drives, something again seen in many animal species who engage in complex mating rituals, that can even include biological features of attraction (colors, smells, largest crab claw as with fiddler crabs) and social displays of sounds and singing, dances, preening, sorting of objects, nesting. What is perhaps uniquely human is our ability and seeming need to personify, mythologize, or spiritualize desire. After all, so much literature, music, novels, and art express desire in heightened terms.

We can further see how eros takes many shapes that all boil down to the same thing when cars are used as metaphors of masculinity, to pick up girls, to symbolize women and sex. Many songs talk about cars like women or use driving as an extended metaphor for sex. The very voluptuous curves of a sports car or the chiseled masculine boxes of a truck convey certain gender and sexual

assumptions. Similarly, food has long been used to express desire in ways that are ambiguous or consciously sexual. Not only are there supposedly aphrodisiac foods, the history of food-as-sex is positively ancient, as is both of their connections to a civilizing or domesticating influence. The oldest surviving piece of human literature, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* contains a story where food and sex transform the wild man Enkidu into a civilized man. Feeding a potential mate is an obvious form of domestication and humans again aren't alone in using food as foreplay.

Humans are created like the other animals at creation, in that they are commanded to reproduce. We might surmise that human sexuality is thus created, good, and thoroughly natural. The Bible often identifies sexual desire as particular to youthfulness, understandably, and this will give us a hint about the direction Scripture is heading. So, rather than trying to find distinctly *human* ways of being sexual, or trying to spiritualize sexuality as distinctly good, it seems clear from Genesis that human sexual union is not necessarily more of a good than what is given to other animals. Adam was looking for a companion as the other animals had companions. The other creatures had their complement and man needed woman for this.

The key to understanding eros, then, is to understand that merging our bodies with objects—be it food in our mouths, bodies in cars, or bodies interpenetrating each other—is the understanding that satisfaction comes by blurring the lines between ourselves and the other is the heart of eros. Eros is equivocation, a form of confusion... con-fusion.

This is the logic of imitation. Aiming to become like others, desiring to be like them, to be them, to be in them is the movement toward identification of this = that or me = you. Eros, then, is animal, infantile, learning and loving through imitation and instinct. Eros is also then at the heart of how humans try to group themselves with one another. We aim to join this or that clique, party, group, and we do so by becoming like them. Eros, taken to its ultimate conclusion, creates sex cults, whether in ancient Dionysus ritual orgies, early and fundamentalist Mormonism, or any number of modern examples.

Eros thus also helps us understand narcissism and the dual victim-dominator movement that narcissists constantly make. Eros is a master, and the narcissist justifies his or her desires and the exploitation of others to satisfy those desires by claiming to be a victim. And by the cult of personality, the

desire for fusion or union with the leader, whether sexual or “spiritual,” transforms everyone into a non-responsible victim. I think it is right to ask whether our whole social fabric and our institutions are built upon this move toward non-responsibility by identification with mythical group identities modelled on some archetype. And thus, we must talk about eros and its relation to sin.

Eros and Sin

Eros becomes sin in two ways: arrested development, and spiritualization. Where human adults cease going on to maturity and turn again and again to adolescent forms of desire, through toys, food, sex, or cliquish behavior, they act in a stunted manner. Eroticism is not adult, it is not a liberation, it is arrested development. And so Paul describes human rebellion as imitation of creation rather than going to maturity in the image of God.⁷ But eroticism is also sinful when we spiritualize it and act as though God or the divine were to be found through desire. Jesus promises to be living water that will cause desire or thirst to end. Thus, the end, or purpose of humans is not to find ourselves in one another, in some gender or sex identity, in the final satisfaction of our animal needs. To create religion out of food, sex, and stuff is idolatry. Or to put it another way, eroticism is the spiritualization of materialism.

Within the material realm, the way in which we attain satisfaction is to consume something lesser, be united with something equal, or to be consumed by and subsumed into something greater. In this way, we can see how the erotic can work for food, sex, and religion (or nationalism, or ethnocentrism, or other identity groups). We think that we find satisfaction by joining a group and being consumed by it, taking on its name and identity. Group identity submission is like a form of BDSM, confessing an identity over which one has little choice as a form of being dominated in a way that ostensibly creates pleasure. It might even involve branding, tattooing a name or a symbol on our bodies to indicate that we are property of others.

The problem with eros of all forms is that we get thirsty again and we “can’t get no satisfaction.” Modern civilization understands this and engineers society precisely to take advantage of this problem. Sin isn’t just personal

⁷ As in Romans 1.

wrongdoing; it is a whole order of civilization built on eros. Consumerism, marketing, social media, and tech companies know exactly how to engage individuals in cycles of desire with the promise of satisfaction after attaining the product or “likes” and just before the moment of climax of satisfaction arrives, moves the goalposts. The trends, merch drops, and product releases come so quickly only the wealthiest and youngest can keep up. Once we buy something, something new and better and more desirable comes out. Once we get the fashion, get onto the trend, something new happens. The speed is intentional, acting like a kind of endless tease or foreplay. Indeed, we might even compare product release events and “unboxing” videos to a striptease. One hasn’t obtained the product and can’t be satisfied, but one’s desire is encouraged. And this is maximally profitable. At the height of desire we are most easily encouraged to pay what it takes to get us to consummation, which of course never comes. Even where sex leads to climax, one is “hungry” again, and as long as desire is cultivated, its ravenous thirst is never quenched. Repeated satisfactions create deeper hunger. The path to growing out of sexual desire is not found in having more sex. Gluttony is not solved by eating.

Eros needs a solution that must lie outside of itself. But the world, especially a materialist one, offers only temporary tastes of satisfaction, just enough to keep us buying more stuff, eating out, using the latest memes (communicating entirely through depersonalized group-speak), and addicted to porn. This world tells us that love is found in the consumption of the other. We eat the world and find ourselves ravenously hungry. Needless to say, ecological disaster is the outcome of insatiable human hunger, insatiable because we are looking for spiritual qualities in something entirely material or animal.

Idolatrous Eros

If “God is love” meant “God is eros” we might expect that such a god is supposed to satisfy us. And so, we find that many people come to church expecting a god of satisfaction, of affirmation, of completion to our life quests. To be fair, there are praise songs and popular sentiments around Christianity that heavily play into this. God, as the one who brings order to the chaos of life, who brings health, wealth, flourishing *on our and our culture’s terms* is an erotic idol. The God that Job encountered, by contrast, offered no word of

affirmation or satisfaction, only a continued challenge to Job's friends' idea of just providence. Indeed, we might even say that the doctrine of providence is often misused to support an erotic idolatry in which "all things work together for good" is taken to mean that God will ultimately satisfy our desires. The reality is that God requires us to bring all our erotic desire, our hunger for food and drink, for the love that finds oneself in the other, our sexual pleasure, our career ambitions, and our group identities to the cross to be crucified with Christ. God doesn't satisfy us according to our desire. God calls on us to grow up in every way into the full stature of the measure of Christ and to have the mind of Christ.

The ultimate question of eros is what kind of relationships we form with it. On its own, eros tends toward consuming and identification relationships. As above, we consume things lesser than us to build us up, we want union with equal things, and we want to be subsumed into greater things, like group identities. These erotic relationships naturally tend toward idolatry, toward an immature relationship in which the self is defined by what the other can do for the self. Erotic relationships are selfish. They curve the self in on itself and view the world as instrumental resources for the self to be or become more of the self.

Agape as Anti-Eros

While the Bible doesn't speak of one thing that I've put in terms of eros above, there are numerous ways in which it describes a similar aspect to sin. What the Bible does do, however, is describe love in very different terms to that of eros.

In the OT, there are certainly many places where erotic love, particularly sexual pleasure, is described positively, most notably the Song of Songs. Again, this is not inherently problematic. The question is whether eros defines every part of the story, including the relationships that develop. The idea of finding oneself in the other, of the kind of puppy love seen in Song of Songs, is a perfectly natural phase of human development. It is an animal expression of the created function of reproduction. The challenge of eros is whether we stay as puppies, or go on to maturity, or whether we spiritualize animal urges meant for procreation as divine goods to find satisfaction in. God's love in the Bible represents mature love, often contrasted with the immature eros of idolatrous Israel. Ezekiel 16 tells this exact story, of a God-

as-husband who cares for a foundling, raises her to maturity, gives her his best, watches her eros-seeking life with the righteous anger of a betrayed spouse, and finally remembers and renews his everlasting covenant with her. The love of God in the OT is not affirmation, it is the true mixture of the wrathful pain of betrayal, and the strength to push through that anger to forgiveness and faithfulness to a promise even when the other has been faithless. God gets nothing out of this. God is not satisfied with a love that brings pain. But God is faithful to his word and to his commitment to give himself fully. Love hurts God, fatally.

This is the background to the NT's discussion of love, or *agape*. Jesus embodies this faithful love of God. As Paul sums it up in Philippians 2, the mind of Christ is *kenotic*, or self-emptying. Rather than seeking satisfaction, Jesus sought the good of his beloved even at the cost of his own demise. As Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."⁸

Paul famously discusses *agape* in 1 Corinthians 13—patient, kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, doesn't insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful, does not rejoice in wrongdoing, rejoices in the truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, never ends. This is a textbook description of anti-eros. Eros impatiently yearns for satisfaction, boasts in its achievements looking for affirmation, bears nothing, believes, hopes, and endures nothing but what will seemingly satisfy. And of all things, eros ends. It always ends leaving a gaping hole where unmet hopes lie, or in the dry disappointment with a lover who has grown familiar.

1 John, of course, spends most of the letter describing the greatest commandment of love. Love is the anti-world. The world is made up of the *lust* of the flesh, the *desire* of the eyes, and the pride of wealth. "The world and its desire are passing away."⁹ This is not so much an apocalyptic statement as it is a statement of fact. *Epithumia* (lust/desire) or *eros*, can only pass away. It is only by love rooted in the eternal God that creates relationships that last forever, as they are forged in Christ and his resurrection. 1 John goes on to famously equate God with love. God is *agape*. This is not the god of eros. Why? Eros consumes the lives of others. Agape lays down its life, not as a sacrifice to

⁸ Jn 15:13.

⁹ 1 Jn 2:15-17.

join some higher cause or group identity or clique, but as an offering from the highest to the lowly. Agape doesn't seek to grow rich, to subsume others and their wealth, but to help those beneath oneself.¹⁰ It might seem strange that 1 John would go immediately from Jesus laying down his life to talking about giving to the poor or *charity*.¹¹ But that line earlier "the pride of wealth" is in some translations and more literally "the pride of life." Eros and agape are both revealed in the flesh and in the material, not simply in emotional or spiritual realms. The love of God is manifest "not in word or speech, but in truth and action."¹² John further says, "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is made complete in us."¹³ In other words, if we want to know God, we must know him through the body of Christ, the people of God manifesting the mature character of God through material, embodied action. Love is action for others, not a sentiment about them.¹⁴

Thus, we see that where eros seeks to consume the material world, to suck it dry, agape seeks to give life to the world and to one another, and to do this by the very material goods of the world. Agape takes on fleshy forms of self-giving in opposition to the erotic forms of other-consuming. Agape will endure hunger to feed another. It will abstain from sex in order to love others. It will refuse to join the group identity but steadfastly stand for truth. Rather than consuming lesser things, agape fosters the life of lesser things. Rather than seeking interpenetration with equals, symbolized most clearly in sex, agape makes covenants with others, preserving their autonomy while offering total commitment *for* another, symbolized in marriage vows. Rather than abasing oneself to be consumed by an identity group, sacrificing oneself on the altar of the bloodthirsty gods of fashion, nation, and religion, agape takes responsibility to create covenanted communities where individuals and differences are respected.

This is a vital point. Eros attempts to erase difference and where it celebrates difference, it does so only by highlighting superficialities and cultural artifacts/remnants. Many people use Christianity as an erotic expression. That's not just about those all-too-many cases of sexual abuse by trusted

¹⁰ 1 Jn 3:16-17.

¹¹ Charity is from the Latin, *caritas*, which is how the Latin Bible (Vulgate) translates *agape*.

¹² 1 Jn 3:18.

¹³ 1 Jn 4:12.

¹⁴ Cf. Jas 2:14-16.

figures, but a statement about those who use Christianity as a group-identity to seek divine affirmation for a group identity. This is most prevalent historically in racism and nationalism. But it is now becoming apparent in a culture war around gender and sexuality. Finding oneself in a group revolving around gender or sex identity—even where those are reinforcing stereotypical or historical masculine/feminine heterosexual identities—seeks to see other people as resources for a cause rather than loving individuals. This is an erotic form of identification, and Christians can certainly use the name “Jesus” to label their own sins, which we do when we use God to justify an identity.

The Image of God: Purpose

So, if agape is anti-eros, and Jesus is agape, then this helps us recontextualize the notion of the image of God and what humans were created for. Rather than focusing on the image of God as something particular to sex, which we saw was part of the general creation of all mammals, we find that Paul says that the image of Christ is what we are predestined *to be conformed to* in Romans 8:29. The image of Christ is, of course, self-emptying love. This means that the goal of Christian life is to become mature in every way, and that by learning to love as Jesus does. Those who have become mature like Christ are worthy to rule with him in his kingdom. They are the “last” who will become the “first.” The purpose God created humans for, to share in his dominion, is thus realized only by the attainment of agape. And this is why image of God theologies that seek to give people inherent dignity are misguided. Love is not an expression of *recognizing* value in others. Love *values* others and actively lifts them up. Love is the act of *giving value*.

Concepts like dignity and human rights show how society tries to manage the consuming eros of many smaller groups and individuals by creating a balance-of-power kind of policy. Human rights are a form of *detente*, a form of agreement borrowed from international relations. All that a sinful world can try to do is subsume the eros of smaller groups and people into larger ones. Dignity and rights are never inherent, they are forms of value dictated by structures of power, like a parent trying to keep children from fighting. Rights are given, not by God, but by states who must back up those rights with enforcement. Where there is no enforcement, there are no rights. But eros resists management or law. Law cannot contain it, shape it, or reform it into

the image of Christ. Only by grace, by the transformative experience of *agape*, by receiving the *gift* of love, can we pass on that gift and be transformed by gift-giving. Thus, we aren't aiming for a ceasefire between warring groups by rights and enforcement, we aren't aiming to create a "more perfect union" by the proper arrangement of laws. We are aiming to follow Jesus' commandment, to love one another as he has loved us by giving ourselves for others. *Agape* expressed in the image of God is not about passively recognizing value in others in some form of altruism (which is rooted more in Buddhism), but in active covenanting with one's neighbor. The image of God is not, then, a picture of generic dignity accorded to categories of people or species types. It is the character formed in continual acts of *agape* between people with names.

The Politics, Philosophy, and Theology of *Agape*

We've been linking love, eros, power, politics, food, sex, cars, cults, narcissists, and more in one essay. This is a lot of ground to cover with a singular explanation. Before coming to a practical conclusion, let's take it one step further to consider what all this means for how we think about God.

How we deal with desire and how we frame desire in our stories is foundational to most everything we do. After all, the reasons why we do what we do is mostly what our stories end up being about. This conversation between eros and *agape* is truly foundational. So, let's get back to some deep foundations for what this means about how we perceive reality and God.

We saw that eros is the expression of non-responsibility, spiritualizing, mythologizing, idolizing our desire and justifying its mastery over us. We also saw that these mechanisms are intentionally utilized by those who seek power in the world. Power comes by manipulating desire, moving desire away from disparate ends toward a singular end, the will of the leader, or the nation, or the group. In politics, this is all clear and evident in cults of personality of the leader.

But how do we get different people to work together for a common cause? How do we get them to exchange their desires for something *greater*, some *higher* purpose? We create a hierarchy of value. Family is submitted to nation and sons are sent to war with bittersweet joy. We create ladders to climb to attain higher stages of value. And eventually, to theologize this, we create ladders to reach the heavens through forms of behavioral management that we might call "righteousness." Justification by works, by proving oneself, by

sacrificing lesser things for higher goals, is the essence of this political theology. Eros, in other words, creates hierarchies of value by categorizing things, simplifying them down to elements that can be measured and evaluated. We have to transform complex people into simple categories in order to put them in a place where they belong.

And we can mythologize all of this, creating “vocation” and “calling” and giving people a sense of purpose in living within a certain place in society. We tell people that their highest and best end is found in fitting in, integrating, joining the larger movement, and conforming to the categorical stereotypes most conducive for the smooth functioning of the social hierarchy. This is found clearly in gender roles. But it is also found in conversations about employment, social class, and even racial or ethnic narratives. Integrating individuals into premade categorical identities is how we become governable, manageable, and thus “lovable”.

*Judgment by eros is an epistemological sin.*¹⁵ Eros creates categories. It requires that we simplify complex reality into forms that we can boil down to the adolescent mode of desire. Desire is not for a relationship, but for possession and consumption. Eros is conquest. Erotic desire transforms complex individuals into simple categories. It’s like the difference between owning one house with all the hassle that goes with it, and the creation of a real estate empire with property managers. We are told the higher desire is to grow, to get more, because having actual relationships with complex realities is hard, requires responsibility, and requires a form of practical wisdom and diversity of skills. Desire moves us toward a singular thing, freeing us to ignore the annoying mundanities of daily life. The higher one climbs, the simpler things become, until godlikeness is nothing but solipsism—pure selfish simplicity.

The erotic god, the god of desire, is simple, is everything... and thus nothing. This is the god that Aristotle understood, thought contemplating itself. It is also the notion of sin that Augustine understood when he described

¹⁵ Epistemology is the study of how people know things, the ways in which thought works. Epistemological sin isn’t quite the same as the “noetic effects of the fall” because it’s not a brokenness of the mind, it is the immature use of the mind. Sin is not described as brokenness in the Bible, but it is often characterized as immaturity or “foolishness.”

the “city of man” as characterized by love of the self.¹⁶ Eros seeks itself, to glorify itself, to consume others to make itself. Eros is upwardly mobile. Agape moves downward through self-emptying. Erotic religion or spirituality seeks union and loss of the self in higher realities. Agape finds union on the cross. The loss of self comes, not by consumption, but by donation. Agape, in other words, is gift-giving that forms relationships, multiplying itself. Eros is a zero-sum game. To gain requires others to lose. The God who is agape reveals himself in self-giving, not in praise-seeking. The God of the Bible doesn’t want worshippers, but imitators of his gift.¹⁷ He doesn’t want infantilized people who seek loss of the self, but to raise people to be their mature selves in Christ, not by becoming highly disciplined in spiritual practices, but by giving themselves for the creation of new relationships that spread the love of Jesus.

The “problem” is that all humans have a limited relational capacity. We have an inversely proportional relationship between quantity and quality of relationship. Not everyone has a formulaic number of people they can know as acquaintances, as friends, and as close friends. Once we try to go beyond these limits, agape is transformed into eros by necessity. We cannot love groups of people, because now we are loving the *idea* of a people, not people themselves. God alone has infinite relational capacity. God knows the numbers of hairs on our heads, stars in the sky, sand on the seashore.¹⁸ The good news of the gospel of *agape* is that God does not know or love by category or simplification. God doesn’t love ideas of people, or ideal people, or entertain visions of perfection. God loves real creatures, even the deer with the broken leg, destined to die, even the sparrow who falls after running into a pane of glass.¹⁹ This also means that God’s *agapeic* love is not changed in the slightest by our attempts at conforming to this or that group identity. God’s love is God’s action of self-giving for all of creation, not as a whole, but in each subatomic particle. And it is this love that upholds the whole creation. If we want to get “in tune” with the “universe” we must do so, not by becoming a drop in the bucket, not by conforming our patterns to the seasons, but by loving our neighbors with quality, not trying to scale it quantitatively. The

¹⁶ Augustine, *City of God*.

¹⁷ Cf. Isa 1:11-17.

¹⁸ Ps 147:4; Mt 10:30; Lk 12:7.

¹⁹ Mt 10:29.

good news of the God of Jesus Christ is that agape created and sustains all things.

Thus, the God of the Bible as revealed in Jesus Christ is not interested in conforming people to a blueprint, not in making them align more with a certain categorical definition of “perfection” like “being more fully human” (whatever that means). This means God’s love does not justify anyone for anything they do, or any identity they embody to any degree of perfection. God justifies agape. Who is it that God justifies? Those who do his will.²⁰ Those who faithfully embody the love of God that gives itself.²¹ God is love, and we are called to have the mind of Christ. Agape, thus proves itself to be the lynchpin that allows us to reconcile the false debates between faith and works, and predestination and freedom.

Agape is the faithful work of God, the keeping of the commandment of God, the imitation of God and the mind of Christ. Those who love as Christ loved do the will of God and keep his commandments.²² No one can believe in the God of the Bible without desiring to fulfil his commands, so that the love of God is both the faith and the work that manifests in love for one another. This is the logic of love, and to separate it out into an *ordo salutis* mistakenly thinks that one can be justified by Christ’s love if that person does not manifest Christ’s love. The gift of love does not remain in an individual without withering and dying. Agape cannot be contained, it must pass through everyone it touches.

So also, agape helps us understand why God’s predestination is not a constraint of human freedom, but its liberation. For, the Bible does not teach that God rules the world like a dictator, like an erotic leader who demands conformity to his image of the good and threatens disaster on those who refuse.²³ Rather, God is revealed in Jesus, and so we are predestined in love,²⁴

²⁰ Mt 12:50; Mk 3:35.

²¹ Lk 18:14. Paul’s theology emphasizes justification by faith... but that faith has to also be put in context of his teaching in 1 Cor 13 in which love outlasts faith. For Paul, faith must lead to love as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), love is what we are predestined into (Eph 1:4), love forms our root and ground (Eph 3:17) and those who do not love cannot be justified because they are not faithful in fulfilling the command of Jesus (Gal 5:14).

²² Jn 15:17; 1 Jn 3:23, 5:2-3; 2 Jn 5-6.

²³ The lines between violent authority and sexual abuse are thin and crossed extremely often.

²⁴ Eph 1:4-5.

to love, and thus to be free from the bondage of the zero-sum logic of eros. It is not “consume or be consumed” it is “become yourself by giving yourself.” In other words, true individuality and individuation *happen precisely because God has predestined us in love*. God has destined us, not to conformity, but to individuality, to be known by the one who can know every detail. We manifest the love of God by loving others in the details, not in the universals.

Erotic Leadership

Because God’s love is liberation of individuals to total individuality-in-love-of-others, this means that Christian visions of leadership have to be radically different to those of the world. It is a convenient fiction, almost wholly widespread now, that freedom can be sustained and created by hierarchical institutions. Nearly all modern nations claim to offer freedom through governance by the people, from the *Peoples Republic* of North Korea and *Peoples Republic* of China to the United States which proclaims that it is government “by the people, for the people.” The method of maintaining this fiction in the West typically comes through corporations. Somehow, we think dictatorial regimes, if limited to work hours, can form a free people. Freedom is not forged by hierarchy. Freedom does not come from a “great leader” whether he or she be a political or corporate figure. In reality, the only difference between a surveillance state with social credit and a corporation that watches its employees and grades their performance, is one of scale and extent of coercive power.

Erotic leadership models were pioneered philosophically by Plato in *The Republic*, which founds the whole notion of a state on labor specialization that creates a hierarchy, a caste system, differentiated value of people, censorship, and the sacrifice of all things to the good of the state. Whether in business or politics, the logic explored by Plato remains the same, no matter how much “Jesus” we throw at it.

Eros is rooted in imitation of one another. Its vision of love comes through acquiring the qualities of others, or being related to their identity. Eros creates cliques and trends. It creates stars and great leaders who are worthy of imitation. And these idols take on a godlike quality, from the real cult of emperor worship in Rome or in North Korea, to superstar CEOs in America. It is in this way that we can see how eros, leadership, and theology are

connected. When we make idols, we do so because of the identity and benefits they supposedly convey to us. The gods are projections of our best selves.

So it is that erotic institutions are formed that transform people into processes, that simplify people into functions, that treat humans as “resources” or “capital” that aims to realize some “higher” goal. It is in the aim of achieving some great vision of a visionary that countless people are sacrificed in war, or whose time and identity is sacrificed in servitude to some business venture. Erotic leaders seek influence while seeking to divest themselves of responsibility. They shift blame, they seek self-justification. At all costs, erotic leaders must maintain the semblance of control. They must climb to the top and use their authority to remain in power.

And many in the church have fallen prey to visions of leadership derived from the logic of the world and its erotic ruler. When we talk about “getting the right people on the bus” we believe our vision is worthy of the sacrifice of others for its achievement. When “the least of these” (i.e. those who don’t belong on “the bus”) are kicked off, we have ceased to be Jesus-shaped people, and our desired outcomes of the kingdom become unrealizable because we have utilized the methods of darkness, of eros.

An eros-shaped church talks about people as “giving units,” aims to get “butts and bucks,” or “noses and nickels.” An eros-shaped church talks endlessly about vision, mission, and impact. It talks about contributing to the social good, about being “on the bus” of the city it is in, and so taking up its place in a hierarchy as a valued contributor. An eros-shaped church makes discipleship into programs that have diverse inputs and uniform outputs. It attempts to be a Jesus-factory. Unsurprisingly, such churches are rife with scandals that befit worldly institutions—leaders who have a secret sex life that consumes the lives of vulnerable people, leaders who help cover up for others’ sins, leaders who think their way is the only way and get “people under the bus.” Toxic leadership is not a *moral* problem. It’s not a problem of the will. It is a problem of the *logic* of the system. *Hierarchical leadership is toxic.*

The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For

who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.²⁵

Jesus in the Lukan version of this pericope makes very clear that he's taking aim at paternalistic or "benefactor" kinds of leadership. Jesus isn't just talking about abusive leaders. He's talking about all authorities. That is because the logic of hierarchy demands submission, demands self-sacrifice so that the will of others gains supremacy and is treated as right because of the myth of authority. Eros believes in its own myth of its right to rule and boss people about, to treat people as subordinates rather than as a "beloved brother."²⁶

This does impose challenges on institutions like churches. Scaling beyond the relational capacity of a pastor means that a pastor is no longer able to offer pastoral care for a flock, but is transformed from pastoral care into institutional leadership. This isn't impossible to navigate, but it does mean that the categorical simplifications of eros are constantly pulling focus toward efficiencies that transform people into processes.

Agapeic Leadership

Jesus-shaped leadership is a servant form, yes... but much of the literature around "servant leadership" is deceiving if we think that it's about being a humble leader. The problem with *eros* is not moral, it is structural. *Judgement based on eros is an epistemological sin.* Eros corrupts the best intentions of leaders who might aim to build a thriving, large church with a servant heart. The problem is, one cannot serve two masters: eros and agape. One cannot use the tools and methods of eros to achieve agapeic outcomes.

Agapeic leadership is thus size-limited, and self-aware of the limitations of agape. To grow beyond one's relational capacity is to believe oneself godlike in his or her ability to know others without simplification. Love has to know someone's story, has to be able to investigate the rationale for behaviors and self-presentations. Love has to see people as they are, not as we might want them to be. Thus, love is small. So small that when God wanted to demonstrate his love, he became the flesh of one single man at one place and time, a man who himself had a relational capacity.

²⁵ Lk 22:25-27.

²⁶ Philemon 16.

Agapeic leadership thus looks like Paul's teachings about husbands and wives, which is a teaching about the church. Those who aim to lead the people of God must treat them according to 1 Corinthians 13, or Ephesians 5. Yes, marriage is the metaphor that God himself uses of his own relationship with the church, and it is the metaphor that opens up the institutional form of the church to us.

This ultimately means we have to develop *biological* organizations that are *pedagogical*. Erotic leadership seeks to ensconce itself in power, to create lasting systems, to create fictive persons or brands, and a corporate culture. Agapeic organizations seek to replicate themselves through mild multiplication. When two people give themselves to each other sexually as open to procreation, they do not consume one another sexually, they (at least in maturity) become one flesh to create new life and create a context for releasing this new life as mature. This is the very structure God himself instituted for all creatures, including humans at creation. "Be fruitful and multiply" is the structure of agapeic love in which each generation lays down its life for the next.

Families are supposed to represent this kind of relational context, and the inheritance that parents leave to children is not material primarily, but whole-person in shape. Parents die to themselves as they have procreative sex, as the reality of having children will transform their lives in profound ways.

Pastors in this vein are mentors, seeking to lift others up, to equip and empower others to be mature and self-reliant adults who are looking for opportunities to repeat the process of replication in love. Leaders seek to always be training their replacements, developing enduring relationships that ensure care for the elderly and retired, and so having security in the trust of love, rather than in the accumulation of material wealth.

This also means that agapeic leadership doesn't seek to specialize people into specific processes, but to create mature people who are ready for many things and can fill the roles needed by the community in season and out of season. This will never lead to highly engineered outcomes... but it will lead to highly mature and beloved people... and that seems to be the exact contrast Genesis portrays between the lines of Cain and Seth.

Countless other things deserve to be said about agapeic leadership. But the bottom line is that no church can make disciples of Jesus Christ if it

systemically utilizes the logic of eros. Only love begets love. Discipleship only happens by knowing one another.

Sex, Gender, Kingdom

To sum this long discussion up, what does this mean for gender and sex? Here we can simply note that sex is animal. It is created for reproduction. It involves pleasure. We might say all the same things about eating food, or having warm and comfortable clothes and a nice comfortable house. The means of sustaining and producing new life is a kind of good. Companionship is wonderful, but it is not particularly human, nor does our desire for companionship reveal the character of God and his love. These are not bad things, but they are not *mature* things.

Maturity, in the Bible, is not only fostering life, but giving one's life for others. If we are not on a trajectory to maturity but are stuck in an endless adolescent phase of the celebration and pursuit of pleasure and a constant seeking of our identity in others and their approval, we engage in a form of idolatry.

Sex has been over-spiritualized. It is not a special gift from God to humans as opposed to other animals. Thus, believing that our identity lies in our sexuality, whatever its orientation, shows a stunted imagination and understanding of what a person can be. The same goes for gender identity. Being more truly masculine or feminine has nothing to do with being godly. Finding oneself and expressing oneself by means of a gender identity is likewise no expression of maturity. Again, it is part of an adolescent phase of life where gender and imitation of trends within groups is how young people “find” themselves by means of socially constructing their identity in subcultures. The attainment of maturity is not in abandoning sex or gender, but in bringing both of these to the cross and transforming them into forms of *kenotic agape*, self-emptying love for others.

Put another way, we might think that maturity with food involves an evolved and cultivated palate, a connoisseur, a gourmand. And indeed our culture is rife with cooking and eating related content from speed eating competitions, to Michelin starred chef battles, to travel media highlighting the best of various cultures. Is this the highest expression of humanity according to the Bible? No, we might say this is the pinnacle of materialism. To

spiritualize material consumption is simply a cultivated eros. God promised daily bread, manna in the wilderness, and for a food-lover to bring that erotic desire to the cross and be willing to fast, to go hungry, to put talent in service of feeding the needy, that is what *agape* looks like.²⁷

Maturity in the kingdom of God thus involves transforming eros into agape. This will look different for each person who brings a different kind of eros to the cross. And through the *torah* (law) of God that is fulfilled in Jesus who gives us the great command to love God and one another, we find the pedagogical instrument and, in the church, the pedagogical community where discipleship takes the form of transforming our own forms of eros into agape.

If we do not discuss these things in church, if instead we take sides of a culture war and bring into grownup land the bickering of youthful cliques, church will itself become a form of idolatrous religion that strokes our erotic tendencies. If church is not a community of disciplining eros, then it will inevitably become a club of people who imitate one another seeking divine approval for lifestyle choices.

How do we transform eros into agape? This is the question that each of us must ask in community with one another.

²⁷ Again see 1 Jn 3:17-18 and Matt 25:31-46.

Chapter 7

A Theology of Singleness

Rev. Emily Hamilton

We live in an era of competing logics about sex. On the one hand, sex seems to be the most important thing in the world, the pinnacle of human existence, the ultimate metric of our value. At the same time, sex is radically casual; it requires little to no commitment, is transactional, a thing bought and sold that can rapidly devolve into full-on exploitation. This conflicting dynamic—sex is everything *and* sex is no big deal—can leave us in a bewildering double bind as followers of Jesus who seek to affirm that sex is a good gift of God, but not the ultimate purpose of human existence.

There may be no greater way of provoking gospel-leading questions around sexuality today than the vocation of celibate singleness. As the church confronts questions around the nature of sex and sexuality in our contemporary world, retrieving a robust theology of singleness can resource us for faithful discipleship in areas of sexuality, gender and beyond. For in light of salvation history, celibate singleness becomes a distinctly fruitful vocation for the Christian disciple, specifically in how it presents a “foretaste of the eschatological reality that awaits all of God’s people.”¹

Paul writes, “Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do.”² He goes on in this chapter to explain how virginity and singleness are vocations of special, eschatological faithfulness within God’s household because “the time is short.”³ The majority of interpreters throughout church history have tended to read Paul as being hyperbolic and/or overly fixated on Christ’s imminent return leading to a “take-it-or-leave-it approach,” but this often misses the magnitude of the good news Paul shares here as he reinterprets first century sexual mores through the story of the cross.⁴

¹ Danielle Treweek, *The Meaning of Singleness: Retrieving an Eschatological Vision for the Contemporary Church* (Carol Stream: IVP Academic, 2023).

² 1 Cor 7:8.

³ 1 Cor 7:29.

⁴ Treweek, *The Meaning of Singleness*, 162.

The work of historian Kyle Harper tracks how significantly the sexual ethics of the early church stood in tension with those of the ancient Roman empire, which were deeply shaped by patriarchy and centered around the importance of biological reproduction for the perpetuity of the empire.⁵ Married women were supposed to have sex only with their husband in order to fulfill their civic duty of having children, and it needed to be extremely clear to whom their children belonged. Therefore, fathers needed to control and protect the virginity of their daughters, and husbands were to control and preserve the chastity of their wives.⁶ Men, on the other hand, could mostly have sex with whoever they wanted as long as it was not someone else's wife. The burden of state-building meant men needed to have sex with their wives in order to have children, but it was expected that men also would have sex with their slaves or prostitutes, a practice tolerated as an "outlet" to keep them from going after other men's wives.⁷ Then, there were the poor, the slaves, and the prostitutes, who were for poor men; these human beings' bodies were commodified and abused to keep the social engine of the Greco-Roman world on track.⁸ In no small part, the demand for easy, cheap sex drove the slave trade of the ancient world.

Into this cultural context, where powerful men could be promiscuous, where wives' bodies were controlled, where vulnerable image-bearers were commodified, and where, too, sex was everything and no big deal, Paul's vision for sexuality, and in particular *singleness*, is radically counter-cultural and *very* good news.

Paul's gospel-shaped message reminds his Corinthian flock that their bodies "are not for their parents or their husbands...not for babies...not for Rome or Caesar or the homeland or the people...bodies are *for* Jesus."⁹ The gospel of Jesus *decenters* biological reproduction as the only important way to

⁵ Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2016); Jones, *Faithful*, 47.

⁶ Kyle Harper, "The First Sexual Revolution," First Things, January 1, 2018, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/01/the-first-sexual-revolution>.

⁷ Harper.

⁸ Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 3.

⁹ Beth Felker Jones, "Reframing Paul on Sexual Ethics, Part II," Substack newsletter, *Church Blogmatics by Beth Felker Jones* (blog), June 15, 2023, <https://bethfelkerjones.substack.com/p/reframing-paul-on-sexual-ethics-part-e6c>.

live a fruitful life and instead elevates evangelism and discipleship. The gospel of Jesus *decenters* the nuclear family as the most important place for showing love and care in the world, and instead, elevates belonging to the household of God. The gospel of Jesus *decenters* sexual desire and expression as the most important thing about us. Instead, what matters is wholehearted commitment to Christ who has wholeheartedly committed himself to his people. Marriage and biological reproduction are good gifts, but they are relativized in light of God's uniquely generative work of building a new family through the body and blood of his Son by the power of the Spirit. In this household, celibate singleness becomes a position of dignity that uniquely witnesses to the lasting fruitfulness of life in the Spirit and to the ways that God craves a people for himself from every kind of background and social status. Singleness uniquely reflects the ways that the gospel invites us all—single or married—to reimagine our desires for pleasure, family, and fruitfulness.

In general, the first Christians had a much more positive view of singleness and virginity than we do today, even to the point that some of the earliest martyrs were young women who refused forced marriages to non-Christians.¹⁰ Danielle Treweek's book, *The Meaning of Singleness*, deftly traces the historical and theological reasons why the Protestant, evangelical church of the West has lacked such celebration for singleness, and she offers several insights on how and why we ought to retrieve a vitalized vision of the single life for the sake of the whole church's faithful discipleship in our modern context.¹¹ Because her work is so rigorous and particular to the subject of this essay, I will review, with quotations, several of her relevant points below:

In terms of how single people are viewed within broader contemporary culture, Treweek summarizes: "Being regarded as socially abnormative, failing to attain authentic maturity, existentially incomplete, and stereotypically sad and afflicted serves to heighten the single person's sense of their visibility

¹⁰ Jones, *Faithful*, 61.

¹¹ Treweek is a deacon in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, Australia and is openly complementarian. I believe ECO has much to learn from our brothers and sisters around the world and throughout church history, many if not most of whom are *not* egalitarian. We do this of course with discernment and wisdom. Due to Treweek's work touching on issues of sexuality and, tangentially, gender, it feels important to mention her complementarian position. To me, her work on singleness aligns quite well with ECO's decidedly egalitarian posture.

within society. They are ever reminded that they exist as the abject other.”¹² Rather than challenged, Treweek often finds this position as “abject other” *reinforced* within the Church. There, singleness is characterized as *deficient*—described by what it is *not*, *aberrant*—catering toward egoism and selfishness, and *unfulfilled*.¹³ For Treweek, the church has baptized cultural maturation narratives that prioritize marriage and childbearing as critical milestones for achieving adulthood, and they often serve as the primary places where we think love and relationship happen.¹⁴ In what she calls a “bewildering irony” due to Christ’s own unmarried status, numerous Protestant evangelical figures over the last half century have cast marriage as *the* place where holiness and spiritual maturity happen.¹⁵ Thus single people are at a loss when it comes to discipleship. Additionally, Treweek notes how the Reformers, in their zeal to recover marriage as a good gift, over-corrected to the point of prescribing marriage as a “tonic for sexual sin,” thus paving the way for church leaders since then to perpetuate the idea that marriage is necessary to keep individuals from “unbridled lust.”¹⁶ She cites several contemporary teachers and pastors who promote the idea that singleness remains a unique calling for some rather than a form of life through which all of us pass whether through choice (often virtuous choices to avoid marriage with non-Christians), circumstance, divorce or death.¹⁷

In her work of retrieval, Treweek examines four theologians who write with special emphasis about the meaning of singleness as particularly informed by Christian eschatology:¹⁸

- Augustine: “He perceived that Christ’s own resurrection had transformed the nonmarried Christian life into a uniquely intelligible opportunity for virtuous living and teleologically motivated witness in the

¹² Treweek, *The Meaning of Singleness*, 23.

¹³ Treweek, chap. 3.

¹⁴ Treweek, 46–47.

¹⁵ Treweek, 49.

¹⁶ Treweek, 26–28, 57.

¹⁷ Treweek, 56–57.

¹⁸ Eschatology has been a central part of the Christian story that gives meaning to singleness, even in Scripture. See 1 Cor 7 and Jesus in Matthew 22:23–33, Mark 12:18–27, Luke 20:27–40. Since the time of Christ, the church has taught there will *not* be marriage in the resurrection, even if maleness and femaleness persist in our glorified bodies.

current dispensation. The lens of the gospel imbued virginity with special significance in the eschatological age of the now-but-not-yet.”¹⁹

- Ælfric of Eynsham who wrote several hagiographies of spouses who remained chaste after marriage: “Ælfric’s virgin spouses were not merely intended to act as exemplars of right living in the last days, but as ‘threshold people,’ as those who were in the process of transitioning from this world to the next...[in a state] replete with sacramentally significant eschatological value and privileged liminality.”²⁰

- John Paul II: “JPII contends that celibacy (as the virginal state) is a charismatic sign which announces that the teleological destiny lies in glorification rather than the grave...[the unmarried] are liminal figures who literally embody a particular aspect of the eschatological future here in the present.”²¹

- Stanley Hauerwas: For Hauerwas, “one of the most distinctive features of Christianity is that its adherents do not need to physically procreate in order to belong, nor to contribute to or secure the growth of that to which they belong. . . . As a consequence, singleness issues a necessary and even urgent exhortation to the eschatologically oriented church that it ‘grow not through biological ascription but through witness and hospitality to the stranger.’”²²

From this retrieval, Treweek goes on to argue that singles have a uniquely important place within the community of faith precisely for how they witness for all of us, single and married, toward God’s future new creation. She writes,

“the very presence of singles within its midst functions as a timely reminder of the church’s own eschatological social constitution. God’s people are no longer an exclusive society defined by pedigree, bound by blood, and oriented toward life in this age. . . . As such, it is virtually impossible to overemphasize the sense in which the full inclusion and integration of unmarried members with in the

¹⁹ Treweek, *The Meaning of Singleness*, 175.

²⁰ Treweek, *Singleness*, 187-88, quoting Alison Gulley, “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door: Sexual Renunciation, Eschatology and Liminality in the Lives of the Virgin Spouses,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 117, no. 2 (2018): 141-59.

²¹ Treweek, *The Meaning of Singleness*, 193.

²² Treweek, 209. Quoting Hauerwas, *After Christendom?* Nashville: Abingdon, 1991. 128

bod of Christ is integral to the church's own self-understanding of exactly who it is, where it is bound, and what (or rather, who) it testifies to."²³

Put in opposite terms, the church devalues singleness to our peril, for to do so undermines our "own unique identity as a community whose collective life is constituted by the eschatological kingdom of God rather than by family bloodlines."²⁴ Singles, then, are "threshold people," for while marriage is a *foreshadow* of the heavenly union between Christ and the church, singleness is a *foretaste*, "a literal proleptic participation in the intrahuman relational bonds of siblinghood that will *actually* be continued into eternity."²⁵

Such a retrieval of the dignity and virtue of singleness offers the Church a fruitful foundation as we seek to be faithful around questions of sex in our world today. For, in the end, the gospel relativizes biological procreation around the goal of making disciples; sexual expression is not the pinnacle of human existence; the church as the family of God becomes the primary community in which we are nurtured and known. Singleness is a gift to the whole church that bears witness to who we truly are in Christ and the future he has secured for us.

²³ Treweek, 237.

²⁴ Treweek, 239.

²⁵ Treweek, 231.

Chapter 8

A Theology of Ecclesial Marriage

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

A Theology of Christian Marriage

In this chapter we discuss how Christian marriage is a uniquely biblical concept engrained within the story of God's work and plan for the maturation of his image bearers. From creation to new creation, we will find that marriage is not an *institution*, but a relationship that, like other relationships, grows and transforms over time as it matures. This directly contrasts with worldly understandings of marriage, whether medieval or modern, that often understand marriage within a legal or economic framework. The outcome of this will be that, while Christian understandings of marriage can operate within worldly institutional frameworks, it is a mistake to confuse or conflate the two, either to try to force Christian notions on pagans, or to mistake certain worldly forms for the gospel.

An Institution?

Marriage within Christian theology has traditionally been linked to creation and has traditionally been described as an institution. Both of these positions are understandable, but with the benefit of hindsight after Christendom, we can see some biblical and theological weaknesses. While Jesus himself links marriage to creation, he also has an eschatological or kingdom understanding of marriage as provisional and passing away. We'll discuss that below. But here we can simply see that marriage is not simply created, it also has a purpose that goes beyond itself to some form of elimination of itself.

Further, the notion of an *institution* is not attested in Scripture, depending on how we define that. Normally speaking, we might say that an institution is a social norm or convention that enables predictable behavior. Institutions are a kind of autopilot or automated setting that all accept in order to facilitate our efforts in other directions. As an institution, marriage norms need to be widely accepted and practiced, and along with that would go gender norms and roles. As an institution, marriage forms a key part of the social fabric of how a society will operate, what children will grow up within, and grow to

imitate. And because it has formed such an essential fabric of human society since time immemorial, conscious reflection on its nature can seem dangerous and provocative. And changes within the fabric of marriage would require significant external impetus. Institutions have high inertia by design. Such external pressures to marriage have included things as varied as famine, war, migration, social class, technology, and cross-culture encounters.

Thus, it is understandable that the church might want to point to a theology of creation to establish marriage as a stable institution that has an ideal form that can resist the vagaries of history. Yet, while there are certainly expectations in the Bible about lifelong heterosexual monogamy, this does not rise to the level of a social institution in the way we might expect. The Bible has no weddings in it.¹ Who performs a wedding? What is the exact legal moment of sealing the bond? Are there rituals or ceremonies to mark the occasion? What role does God play through human representatives? None of these questions has a distinct answer in the Bible. Even issues as fundamental to the nature of marriage like exogamy (marriage outside a social group) or endogamy (marriage within a social group), which seem relatively fixed in the Old Testament on endogamy (marriage within the tribe/people group, non-gentiles), appear strange to modern Christians.

The reality is that the church has often focused more on morality and legality than it has on theology. The genre of our conversations about marriage have focused on what is licit or illicit, what is God approved or a great evil. Where theology has come into play, then, it has done so to legitimize or baptize certain cultural practices with a divine seal of approval (or disapproval). Rather than setting the agenda, then, theology has played a supportive role. But this is exactly what seems to me to be what Jesus and Paul are intent on upsetting. For them, marriage no longer belonged to the state or community, but to the church and to God, and thus it was brought into a different narrative.

A Relationship

If we are to develop a *theology* of marriage, we would do well to look at what the Bible thinks is important about the relationship between men and women. This, again, does not come as statements of ideal types or legal

¹ Yes, the wedding at Cana might be an exception, but all we see of that event is the reception or party with no description of any legal or ritual performances.

requirements but as a relationship. And as a relationship, its meaning is contained within the narrative of responsibility, rebellion, reconciliation, elevation. I use these words instead of the common creation, fall, redemption, new creation words because the latter tend to focus on states of being rather than on the kinds of relationships. For the Bible, states of being are rarely discussed, but the relationship between God and his people, along with his expectations of them, compose the fabric of the whole thing.

Responsibility

The image of God, as I often write and say, is one of the most abused concepts in Christian theological tradition. Rather than a conversation about human essence (“what it means to be human”), it is clearly from the text of Genesis 1 a responsibility and role of dominion or *sovereignty*. The image of God is ruling with God according to his character, and so it is a focus on qualification for responsibility. We know this because the NT presents Jesus in the exact framework of the image of God.² His temptation is presented as a trial, his life as proof of maturity, and his resurrection as the elevation to authority. So, his Great Commission is once again the distribution of a sovereignty that is now his: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me...”³ Just as God delegated sovereignty through the image of God in Genesis, so does Jesus in the Great Commission. This sovereignty is delegated authority from God to his representatives, and with that authority comes responsibility. Thus, what we see in Genesis 2 is a probation, a trial run. Adam and Eve are tested by God through the serpent to see if they are worthy of the responsibility they have been given. We know this because this is exactly what the gospels write about Jesus’ own temptation, which is clearly modeled on that of Adam and Eve.

Thus, in the beginning, God desired a people who would rule with him according to his character, and that rulership would not be gender-specific, but character-specific as the two join together in ruling together. Rulership can bring out the worst in people or the best. The test is whether Adam and Eve were ready to demonstrate rulership with the mind of Christ as Paul discusses in Philippians 2. They were not. But within the promise and

² Heb 1:3.

³ Mt 28:18.

hope of this responsibility, we can discern something of the kind of relationship that ought to exist between godly men and women.

First, God created us to need one another. Neither male nor female is sufficient alone.⁴ Our complementarity is not designed for authority of one over another, but to demonstrate the character of God. In other words, marriage (along with sex) itself is the opportunity to live out the very test of Eden among ourselves. How will we relate to the other gender? Will we seek to use the other gender to fulfill our needs, or will we work together to attain maturity that would otherwise be nearly unobtainable? Will we transform gender into stereotyped social roles with rigid hierarchies? Or will our different genders represent a challenge that refines us toward maturity? The main problem with Complementarianism in theology is that it assigns to the category of gender what should be assigned to character and maturity.

Second, the relationship between male and female is normally productive of life.⁵ While reproduction as the central point of marriage is not a modern value, this is a point that Jesus will explicitly take up in the Great Commission. For modern people, life is relatively easy and assured. Infant mortality rates have plummeted, death by disease, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, was very limited by historical comparison. The notion that God is the author of life and the one to whom all life belongs is relatively foreign to people who do not know the animals they eat and do not care what happens with their lives. Leviticus, by contrast, makes a big deal out of returning all life to God as symbolized by blood, a symbol that even the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 thought was still very relevant.⁶ Relationships that embody the fostering and nurturing of life reveals God's self-giving character. While biological reproduction is expected and normal, the orientation toward the propagation of life is clearly part of the function of dominion or sovereignty. And with that, we might inquire about ways in which the church, as the bride of Christ, bears the fruit of life and fosters life in a world of death.

Third, male and female are created as complementary companions. We see in Genesis 2:18-23 that the man alone is not good and that he needs a

⁴ Gen 2:18.

⁵ I acknowledge that there are lamentable exceptions to this, not only in the world today, but throughout the Bible as well. Nevertheless, these are lamentable because they are exceptions to expectations and hopes in the regularity of procreation.

⁶ Acts 15:20, 29.

helper. While we've already published a book that goes into much more depth about the interaction between male and female in terms of function and hierarchy, the point in Genesis 2 is not that a "helper" is a subservient person. Female is not submissive to male by God's design, but by human rebellion. The "help" is the broad-spectrum of the fostering of life through the sovereignty of being the image of God. Adam cannot do this alone but needs the woman. What we might perceive in this is that woman and man are meant to refine one another, not simply fulfill reproductive functions. The help is in expressing dominion, and that requires the kind of person who grows to maturity and takes responsibility, something that usually requires accountability and encouragement. The mutuality of marriage is that it should push both toward maturity together. This complementarity also militates against any notion of single-person leadership in any relationship, whether in monarchy, dictatorship, corporate or church governance, or in marriage. No human is fit to rule alone.

Fourth, the relationship of marriage in Genesis 2 shows that the two become "one flesh." Where this might on the surface, again, seem like a simple explanation of sexual union, it is far more likely that the language of "flesh" is about the formation of a lineage, a people who bear a likeness.⁷ It is in the union of male and female that a whole people, a family, a tribe is created, with the hope and expectation that they would be brought up to bear the character of their parents. Thus, the multiplication of "one flesh" is not simply biological, it is the extension of the sovereignty of God according to his character passed on from generation to generation. This fits much of the pedagogical language surrounding the Torah as seen, e.g. in Deuteronomy 6.

Marriage was thus established at creation to be a relationship of growing responsibility expressed primarily through sovereignty in God's character, and this through procreation and pedagogy. In other words, marriage is not about male and female for themselves or one another, but love expressing itself in overflowing out of that relationship into responsibility-taking. Put another way, gender only makes sense not by their difference, but by their mutuality and relationship. That isn't to say that singleness is

⁷ "Flesh" *basar* is used frequently in Genesis, and often refers to people who share family ties, but also to similar behavior. The link between family and behavior is very strong in Scripture, and forms a key component of the image of God range of ideas.

problematic. Emily Hamilton does an excellent job dispelling that myth.⁸ Rather, singleness merely demonstrates that men and women need one another in the church as in the family, to refine one another, and to have a gender identity in mutuality that is also *not* sexual. The mutuality in marriage goes way beyond sex, and to make sex the main point of marriage misses the whole point.

Rebellion

Adam and Eve proved not up to the task of taking responsibility. Their temptation to be like God, to set their own values by deciding what is good and bad (“knowing good and evil”) is an expression not just of disobedience, but of the acid of mistrust that destroys all relationships from within. The lack of trust is a lack of *fides* or faithfulness. God, who is *hesed*, steadfast covenant faithfulness, or “love”, requires above all that his representatives be faithful as well.

This is not a “Fall.” This event is never called this in Scripture, nor is sin ever discussed as a “fall.” There is no *condition* of fallenness or brokenness described in the Bible. That represents later theological attempts to make sense of the way of the world through categories learned more from Plato than the OT. The Bible’s own language reflects the family lineage notion we just discussed—the people of God as opposed to the “nations” or *goyim*. The world is run by the *goyim*, the children of Cain, and they threaten the people of God. This is a rebellion that is manifest in Cain and his mistrust of God, his jealousy of Abel, his exacting of vengeance, and his construction of his own world. Cain is the embodiment of violence. His name likely means “spear.” And his lineage grows to maturity in rebellion, with Lamech announcing his own 70-fold vengeance. And within this orgy of violence, there is also an orgy of sexual libertinism shown in Gen 6. While we cannot know for certain what the sons of god and the daughters of men exactly means, their sexual relations are clearly not an expression of fostering life, but glorying in death.

All of this comes to the fore in how God says men will treat women. They will “dominate” them, using the same word that was used for the role the image of God should have played in creation.⁹ Rather than growing mature

⁸ See chapter 7 of this volume.

⁹ Gen 3:16.

together, now sexual or gender violence would be the norm with men dominating women as though they were creatures. Now marriage becomes confused, and patriarchal and paternalistic views bear this out, that the story is told from the male perspective, using the female to support the male. And with this comes a focus on creation and creativity, as warring with creation and gaining victory over enemies, real or mythical. The narrative of pedagogy, growth to maturity through disciplining love and care, what might perhaps be a more feminine or maternal story, is lost in the blood and guts of conquest and civilizational advances seen in the line of Cain.

Marriage among the *goyim* takes on a vision of conquest, a war of the sexes, a battle for domination and use of the other. It takes the form of leveraging economics and other worldly means to gain one's desire. Stereotypically, for the woman, it takes the form "desiring her husband" as the one who will complete or fulfill her.¹⁰ And this is part of what characterizes the "present evil age." The marriages of the patriarchs will thus bear all the hallmarks of a people coming out of an older way of thinking and behaving toward one another. Abraham and Sarah use Hagar for the want of offspring, rather than wanting to form a lineage according to a certain character. While there are many forms of sexual violence attested in the Bible, rebellion also takes the form of using sexuality for ends other than for the giving and fostering of life and the creation of a lineage of those who bear the image of God as learned from their parents.

This is what makes sexual immorality an "abomination" in the OT. Sexual immorality is treated as a particular kind of evil, in line with idolatry, and murder. Idolatry denies the author of life and thus takes the giving of life (sex) and the taking of life (murder) into one's own hands. Sexual immorality is thus both an expression of idolatry, and also therefore the formation of character away from the image of God and toward the image of Cain-Lamech. So the Gentiles of the NT also practice the same kinds of sins that the rebels

¹⁰ Gen 3:16. Note that translations differ significantly on how they translate this passage. The ESV, for example makes a massive interpretative step in translating that "your desire will be *contrary to* your husband." A literal translation would be "And to your husband will be your desire." The ESV being a complementarian translation needs to specify that desire for her husband is not a curse, only fighting between them to which the solution will be male headship. The NRSV, by contrast might suggest that desire for her husband is itself part of the problem to which male headship is the expression of acquiescence or domination.

of Genesis do. Violence mixed with sex and idolatry are normative for the “nations.” Again, every quest for conquest, every demand to build more towers and name ourselves as creators—as in Cain’s city Enoch (foundation), in the making of a name for ourselves in Babel—and in the glories of bloody, sexy civilization represented by the whore of Babylon in Revelation 18, we find the combination of abominations of sexual immorality, murder, and idolatry.

Marriage among the gentiles is thus part of the logic of this form of civilization. It often exists for economics and politics. It instrumentalizes people, often women and children, toward the gain of men and the making of a name and heritage for the man through systems of primogeniture. No wonder that marriage starts to disappear or become meaningless when economics, politics, and pleasure no longer require durable, procreative relationships.

Reconciliation and Responsibility

If Christian marriage is going to have a part to play in combatting this Cainite story, it will do so by working toward a different kind of relationship, one of reconciliation and responsibility. The answer to rebellion is reconciliation, when warring parties make peace through forgiveness and pursue a new relationship. Reconciliation is the operative word, and Paul uses it in often to sum up the whole of the mission of God. God is “reconciling all things to himself.”¹¹ This is what Jesus came to do between the people of God and God, for the sake reconciling *all creation*. Naturally, the relationships between male and female are implicated in this, and it is the ministry of reconciliation that makes Christian marriage transformative.

So, Paul sees that marriage is itself something of a symbolic reality of Christ and the church, or the people of God. Now, symbolic realities are hard for moderns to comprehend. I’ve written about this at length in our other books on the sacraments and the church and would point to those works for more detail.¹² But here we’ll just say that a Christian marriage is a form of the church. Christian marriages participate in the reality of the relationship of God with his people. How so? They are not just pointers, but they embody the ministry of reconciliation in the flesh. They transform erotic people into

¹¹ Col 1:20. See also 2 Cor 5:19.

¹² See “Advanced Sacramentology” in *The Lord’s Supper: ECO Theology and Resources*.

agapeic people who make disciples through children.¹³ Whether it is through biological offspring, or the adopted children that God brings into his people through Jesus, the giving and fostering of life, the raising up of the next generation with the maturity to do even better than our own, is a crucial part of what discipleship looks like.

The gospel of reconciliation thus leads immediately toward the realization of the image of God in Christ that we ourselves can image by joining the pattern of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Colossians 1:15-29 describes how Jesus, the exact image of God, the creator, the head of his body (the church) has engaged in a whole-creation reconciliation by uniting all with his death, so that, raised to new life and continuing steadfastly in faithfulness, everyone may be presented mature in Christ. So, we have this cycle of the mature image of God in Christ as creator reconciling himself to all things as all things participate in his death, and are thus able to be raised mature. The going through death with Jesus is essential for Paul, so essential that he sees his own sufferings as "filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" for the church.

How does marriage fit into this? Well, it is in this that marriage presents itself a microcosm of this total reconciliation by becoming a school of discipleship. What God has created or brought together of two into one flesh, God has reconciled. But this requires dying to ourselves so that new life might come.¹⁴ Put another way, marital consummation is not found in sexual union, but in the union that comes through a shared living sacrifice of ourselves for others.

Marriage, in other words, is the school of discipleship, just as the church is. Its goal is to present everyone mature. Its means of doing this is by shared self-sacrifice and intentional pedagogy. And marriage provides countless opportunities for reconciliation and new beginnings.

Elevation

Finally, Jesus is elevated in his ascension, at which point he leaves his people behind with what they need to continue growing without constant input. In other words, Jesus aims to release mature followers, who are not

¹³ See chapter 6 for a theology of agape vs. eros.

¹⁴ See John 12:24.

unsupported (i.e. by the Holy Spirit), but who are not accompanied by Jesus as pedagogue. Once they have learned of Jesus and his character, they are prepared to be released into the world as mature people who will “be fruitful and multiply” or “make disciples of all peoples.” All of this, of course, is supposed to be symbolized in baptism, which is not about individual choices for self-identifying based on religious faith statements, but signifying a life committed to following Jesus and going on to maturity in him. Baptism signifies a death and rebirth into new realms of responsibility.

The elevation of Jesus to the right hand of the Father is also Jesus “going to prepare a place” for his followers. “In my Father’s household there are many places to dwell. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”¹⁵ Note how I have translated *oikia*, not as “house” but as “household” or could have been “family.” The point is, Jesus goes to prepare a dwelling place for us in the presence of his Father. This contrasts with the palace gardens of Eden which were outside of the throne room. So as we see the elders of Revelation 4:4 (and beyond), they are gathered in the throne room of God, with crowns themselves.

The elevation of the people of God is a reward of responsibility. A job well done deserves the kind of rest signified by a king on the throne, not just God, but his people too.¹⁶ This was the test Adam and Eve faced, the reason they were made for one another, and it is the opportunity presented to each of us in marriage. Will marriage be the school of discipleship, the microcosm of Christ and the church, that prepares us as faithful in small things to be responsible for greater things? God is not impressed with great CEOs or generals or political leaders who crush their enemies, make a bunch of money, or create an empire. God is pleased with faithful servants who participate in his ministry of reconciling all things to himself. And what better place to learn this mission than in marriage where dying to oneself is needed daily?

This is why there is no marriage in the resurrection. It has fulfilled its duty. And so too there is no “church” in the resurrection, for there is no longer a need of assembling the people at various times, but the people are united with God in his presence.

¹⁵ John 14:2, my translation.

¹⁶ This is the logic of the parable of the talents or minas.

If we are to apply a biblical theology of marriage as the school of discipleship to questions raised by the LGBT movement, we find that the answers are fairly simple. The wrongness of homosexuality is less about the behavior, and more about a misunderstanding of what sex is for. The same can equally be said of heterosexual marriages in which men dominate women, or a woman nags her husband and fails to see her own shortcomings or invite discipling conversations. The abominable nature of homosexuality in the OT was seen to involve its relationship to idolatry and thus to the right we think we have to be masters of life and death without responsibility. Christian marriage is not about sex. It's not about creating a legitimate context for sex. It's about growing people up, man and wife, into mature people who give life by giving themselves, and foster life going on to maturity by training up a child in the way he or she should go.¹⁷ This is systemically impossible when the foundation of a relationship or marriage is sexual desire.

Likewise, we could say that a fixation on gender identity, on gender roles, and gender functions is the result of the dissolution of marriage as the normative structure of human society. Christian marriage doesn't uphold this or that specific gender role. Instead, we saw that gender is far more about complementarity between different people that challenges one another to serve one another, die to oneself, and seek to become mature in union rather than seeking our own way individually. Gender difference is essential to maintain, not because there is a divine norm for masculinity and femininity, but because nurturing and domination, force and care, rationality and emotion (to stereotype for a moment) all exist for the benefit of one another and not the cultivation in isolation.

So, in a world where marriage is a dying institution, where it has been rendered functionally meaningless by its divorce from heterosexual and procreative norms, the church has good news about Christian or *ecclesial* marriage—God has established a mutual aid alliance for growing people up into the image of Christ by reconciliation and by training us for the responsibility of spreading this reconciliation to a world of increasing isolation.

¹⁷ Prov 22:6.

Part 1.3 Cultural Foundations

In this part we investigate the world on its own terms. What do social sciences like sociology and history say about why things are the way they are? How might we wrestle with the world on its own terms? Not only does knowing the world as the world help us engage the world on its own terms, the human sciences can be particularly useful in helping us discover areas of our own tradition that hold onto older beliefs due to convention rather than due to truth. Nowhere is this particularly clearer than in the historic patriarchy of Christian theological history. The world of feminism asked the church challenging questions, which caused honest theologians to return to the text and review the evidence. While undoing patriarchy is vital, the world has continued to push gender and sexuality conversations beyond the equality of men and women in ways that need to be understood thoroughly and challenged honestly.

Chapter 9

Vocabulary

Rev. Dr. Meredith Riedel

This chapter offers a simple listing of vocabulary compiled from the LGBTQIA Resource Center at UC Davis. While these terms may be highly contentious, fluid, and politicized, the team believes it is worth being familiar with how the terms are used in literature written from the LGBT perspective. We offer them here without comment.

LGBTQIA+ Abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual. The additional “+” stands for all of the other identities not encompassed in the acronym. An umbrella term that is often used to refer to the community as a whole.

L Lesbian: Usually, someone who identifies as a woman, whose primary sexual and affectional orientation is toward people of the same gender. However, some nonbinary people also identify as lesbians, often because they have some connection to womanhood and are primarily attracted to women.

G Gay: A sexual and affectional orientation toward people of the same gender.

B Bisexual/Bi: A person whose primary sexual and affectional orientation is toward people of the same and other genders, or towards people regardless of their gender. Some people may use bisexual and pansexual interchangeably.

T Transgender An adjective used most often as an umbrella term and frequently abbreviated to “trans.” Identifying as transgender, or trans, means that one’s internal knowledge of gender is different from conventional or cultural expectations based on the sex that person was assigned at birth. While transgender may refer to a woman who was assigned male at birth or a man who was assigned female at birth, transgender is an umbrella term that can also describe someone who identifies as a gender other than woman or man, such as non binary, genderqueer, genderfluid, no gender or multiple genders, or some other gender identity.

Trans: The term trans acts as a more inclusive term than transgender for gender non-conforming and non-binary folks.

Trans man: Usually, a person assigned female at birth who identifies as a man. A person may choose to identify this way to capture their gender identity as well as their lived experience as a transgender person.

Transfeminine/Transfem: A term used to describe a person, usually AMAB or Intersex, who identifies with femininity in some way. Includes Transwomen, as well as other trans+ people who have a connection to femininity.

Transmasculine/Transmasc: A term used to describe a person, usually AFAB or Intersex, who identifies with masculinity in some way. Includes Transmen, as well as other trans+ people who have a connection to masculinity.

Q Queer: An umbrella term used to describe gender/sexual/romantic orientations or identities that fall outside of societal norms. Historically, queer has been used as an epithet/slur against the LGBTQ+ community. Some people have reclaimed the word queer and self identify in opposition to assimilation. For some, this reclamation is a celebration of not fitting into social norms. Not all people who identify as LGBTQIA use “queer” to describe themselves. For example, those of earlier generations are typically averse to self-identifying as queer. The term is often considered hateful when used by those who do not identify as LGBTQIA.

I Intersex: An umbrella term to describe a wide range of natural body variations that do not fit neatly into conventional definitions of male or female. Intersex variations may include, but are not limited to, variations in chromosome compositions, hormone concentrations, and external and internal characteristics. Many visibly intersex people are mutilated in infancy and early childhood by doctors to make their sex characteristics conform to society’s idea of what normal bodies should look like. Intersex people are relatively common, although society’s denial of their existence has allowed very little room for intersex issues to be discussed publicly. Hermaphrodite is an outdated and offensive term that has been used to describe intersex people in the past.

A Asexual/Asexuality/Ace: A broad spectrum of sexual orientations generally characterized by feeling varying degrees of sexual attraction or a desire for partnered sexuality. Asexuality is distinct from celibacy, which is the deliberate abstention from sexual activity, despite sexual desire. Some asexual people do have sex and do experience varying levels of sexual attraction. There

are many diverse ways of being asexual. A person who does not experience sexual attraction can experience other forms of attraction such as romantic attraction, physical attraction and emotional attraction, as these are separate aspects of a person's identity. These may or may not correlate with each other - for instance, some people are physically and romantically attracted to women. However, others might be physically attracted to all genders and only emotionally attracted to men.

D Demisexual: Demisexuality is a sexual orientation in which someone feels sexual attraction only to people with whom they have an emotional bond. Most demisexuals feel sexual attraction rarely compared to the general population, and some have little to no interest in sexual activity. Demisexuals are considered to be on the asexual spectrum.

+

Non binary/Nonbinary/Non-binary: A gender identity and experience that embraces a full universe of expressions and ways of being that resonate for an individual, moving beyond the male/female gender binary. It may be an active resistance to binary gender expectations and/or an intentional creation of new unbounded ideas of self within the world. For some people who identify as non binary there may be overlap with other concepts and identities like gender expansive and gender non-conforming.

Neutrois: A non-binary gender identity that falls under the genderqueer or transgender umbrellas. There is no one definition of Neutrois, since each person that self-identifies as such experiences their gender differently. The most common ones are: Neutral-gender, Null-gender, Neither male nor female, Genderless and/or Agender. (Neutrois.com)

Gender Expansive: An umbrella term used for individuals who broaden their own culture's commonly held definitions of gender, including expectations for its expression, identities, roles, and/or other perceived gender norms. Gender expansive individuals include those who identify as transgender, as well as anyone else whose gender in some way is seen to be broadening the surrounding society's notion of gender.

Agender An identity under the non-binary and trans+ umbrella. Some agender people feel that they have no gender identity, while others feel that agender is itself a gender identity. This can be similar to or overlap with the experience of being gender neutral, or having a neutral gender identity.

These terms and definitions are always evolving, changing and often mean different things to different people. You may consider asking someone what they mean when they use a term, especially when they use it to describe their identity.

The terms AFAB and AMAB are used by a wide range of individuals, including those who are transgender, non-binary, or intersex. While AFAB or AMAB may be useful for describing different trans or non-binary experiences, they are generally not considered identities in and of themselves. Calling a transman “AFAB,” for example, erases his identity as a man. Instead, use a person’s requested pronouns and self-description.

Chapter 10

A Sociological History of Gender and Sex

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

Introduction: Moderns Don't Know Marriage

How did we get to a place where gender is fluid, sexuality is an identity, and marriage is about society affirming choices of life partners? There is often a narrative in the church today that Christianity once controlled the meaning and institution of marriage, and thus of gender and sexuality. While Christianity was one voice of varying influence over the past two millennia, it has never been the sole or even main determining factor of marriage, gender, and sexuality. Rather, it is easy to conflate the history of Western civilization with the history of Christianity and thus confuse the influence of the church with an idealized vision.

In this chapter we will consider a brief and broad history of marriage, because marriage has, until very recently, controlled the social meaning of gender and sexuality. We will find that biology, social structures, technology, economics, class or caste, and beliefs about power all play into how gender and sexuality are defined. Into this mix, the Bible offers a theological word with which we need to grapple.

Picture a idealized Christian vision of a wedding. We have a young man who falls in love with a young woman he met at church and got to know through mutual contacts in the church community. They have “courted”¹ for some time, almost always in the presence of other people, have never slept together or really engaged in sexual play of any kind. Both are virgins. They have been assiduous with their premarital counseling with their pastor, and have a date set for their wedding. The bride-to-be is planning a church wedding, and their pastor will officiate. After the wedding they will move in together in a house they are working on purchasing. They have already talked

¹ Courtship as opposed to dating was a large distinction in evangelicalism in the 90s-2000s made famous by works like Joshua Harris' *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. Harris has since both apologized for his views and gone through a serious period of deconstruction. The problem with the courtship narrative is simply that it's an invention that, like many aspects of modern marriage, tries to reimagine the lower classes in light of semi-fictional upper-class Georgian or Victorian practices. Courtship happens at court between *courtesans*.

about having children, have considered the role of sex in their relationship, their mutual agreement on contraception, abstinence, and expectations of how their sexual relationship will work. Neither is addicted to pornography, and both are fairly ignorant of sexual positions, play, etc. To some readers this scenario will sound impossibly naive, what with the constant stream of celebrity pastor sex scandals and the state of youth culture. To others it might sound similar to their own stories. But it's worth reflecting on because this idealized portrait can only exist in a certain kind of environment with certain values, social structures, family arrangements, educational backgrounds, income levels, and more. There's a reason we can picture such a scenario in a place called "Mayberry" quite easily in ways that San Francisco just doesn't quite fit. In other words, there's more to sex, gender, and marriage than Christian belief. These are part of a whole social-package deal, as it were. Many parts of this scenario would break down simply based on the surrounding culture or upbringing of a child. And yet, it's also worth considering how much of this ideal has remained ideal. What was the golden age of Christian understandings of gender and sexuality? It only takes a reading of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to realize that even medieval society of people on a Christian pilgrimage were far from an ideal. Likewise, the realization that the Roman Catholic Church only started getting into the marriage business between the 12th and 15th centuries shows that even the ideal of a church-based wedding is relatively modern in Christendom terms.²

While contemporary people think about gender and sexuality from an individual and choice-based viewpoint, nearly all of human history has approached gender and sexuality from the social side of things. Moderns want to find themselves, to a lesser or greater degree, in gender and sexual identity. Premoderns wanted to be part of a family and form their own family, and that involved finding gender and sexuality in social norms and expectations, to a greater or lesser degree. This means that, in the Bible's world, we cannot talk about gender or sexuality without talking about marriage, and to try to translate the Bible's teaching directly to modern mass society just doesn't make sense. Those who affirm the centrality of gender and sexual identity typically find the biblical evidence on marriage to be unhelpful. To generalize

² See Frances Gies and Joseph Gies, *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987).

premodern society, we could say that gender and sex are marital concepts, and marriage is for procreation and pedagogy. Thus, when we do find exceptions to heterosexuality in premodern societies, it typically involves recreational sex for the rich in addition to a regularized marriage. Homosexual marriage would historically have been a contradiction in terms.

So, we live in an era where definitions have dramatically shifted, and much of the debate about marriage, gender, and sex revolves around the need to identify ourselves based on chosen ideological categories. Modern “mass society” finds inclusion in a choice of like-minded consumption and pleasure. This means that our society is simply not talking about the same thing as premodern ones when we talk about gender and sexuality. For us, reproduction and inheritance are rarely top concerns as they have been for countless previous generations. Rather, marriage is now focused almost exclusively on fulfilling the desire of the partners who then make more or less conscious choices to reproduce by controlled use of prophylactics.

Familial Animals

From a biological point of view, humans are sexual animals who display significant degrees of gender dimorphism. This means we reproduce through coupling of male and female, and these are largely distinguishable by various sex characteristics, from the obvious primary sexual differences in genitalia and mammarys, to secondary sex characteristics such as bone structure, average height difference, body hair, and average strength. Like all animals, reproduction is a necessary part of the human lifecycle, and biology determines many things about sociology, at least of early humans. One surprising aspect of this comes with female menstruation, a monthly fact for most premenopausal women. We moderns talk about a woman’s right to continue functioning normally without anyone having to know about her period. Contrast this to ancient peoples who often practiced a form of social isolation for menstruating women. This includes the people of the Old and New Testaments. While we might immediately jump to talk about human rights and lament ancient patriarchy, this would be to misunderstand ancient society. Women of childbearing age would typically spend much of their reproductive age conceiving, bearing, and nursing children, so that menstruation, rather than the norm, was far less frequent to a woman’s lived experience. It wasn’t that women were isolated every month, unless she was and remained

unmarried. And further, the blood wasn't simply seen as "dirty." Blood is where the life is for the OT, and menstrual blood was thus viewed as a potential source of incredible power, thus it needed containment. Other ancient societies held similar taboos around male and female reproductive emissions, treating them not as profane and dirty, but as sacred and sources of power.

So, it is understandable that much of premodern life revolved around reproduction. With high infant mortality, and lower life expectancy, the replacement rate of humans (number of children required of a couple to maintain a population level) was significantly higher than the approximate 2.1 rate it is today. Thus, a large part of a woman's life would be devoted to childbearing and rearing by necessity. This also meant that a large part of a man's life and life story would revolve around fathering children (e.g. Abraham!). A sign of success for a man would be the production of many offspring.³ And that requires creating a safe and healthy context for the women and children as much as possible. This didn't mean that women didn't "work"! The idea of being a "homemaker" as "not working" is a very modern idea that defines people by their employment status, demonstrating our own meaning-through-being mastered by others. Employment is not freedom, it is simply subjection to a different economic order, and at that, a larger one that is almost impossible to effectively resist.⁴ By contrast, tribal people all worked together to create a household, a complete self-contained economy.

Humans, for the vast majority of the history of *homo sapiens*, likely 99%, have been family animals.⁵ That is, they organized themselves in social groups around the function of reproduction and childrearing. They formed *households* or an *oikos* ("economy" means household rule in Greek). Within the context of family like this, gender and sexuality have meanings almost entirely defined by natural lifecycles. But that doesn't mean all ancient family structures were the same. Not at all! Even reflected in the Bible we see polygamy in the

³ See Psalms 127-128.

⁴ See Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 411-413.

⁵ The 99% statistic comes from anthropologists who estimate that *homo sapiens* is roughly 200,000 years old and of that time, it is only in exceptional places and times that empires have arisen to threaten the reign of the family. In many places, it was only in the 20th century when national governments arose to push down rural family structures, often through forcible relocations leading to substantial deaths in Russia's collectivization, China's "Great Leap Forward" and numerous other examples in smaller nations.

Patriarchs, monogamy assumed in Genesis 2, traditions of kinship that required practice of redeeming relatives in Esther. We see prostitution early on with Tamar in Genesis 38 and Rahab in Joshua, both of whom are vindicated people, and it is Tamar who shames Judah by his faithlessness to his promise to her.

Around the world there is an incredible diversity in how families operated. Some newlyweds moved in with their father's family or tribe (patrilocal), others their mother's (matrilocal), some people groups had incredibly complex systems of *moieties*, or subdivisions that required people to marry into specific subgroups identifiable only by social convention. Some peoples married inside their tribe (endogamy as with Israel) and others had to marry out (exogamy). Some communities traced their identity and lineage through men (patrilineal) and others through women (matrilineal). Diving into marital anthropology literature looks like trying to decipher a complex ancient writing like cuneiform.

Diversity was the name of the game in terms of family and tribal structure, and that also goes with their sexual taboos. Nearly every culture known has had taboos, rules, and laws surrounding suitable forms of human marriage and sexuality. Incest taboos are almost entirely ubiquitous, though the actual relations that count as incestuous vary rather widely. Consider the historic case of endogamy in royalty because of the belief in royal or noble blood. One of the harder questions for anthropologists to answer is "why?" What is the logic behind these social rules? Is this biologically determined that somehow we should know that inbreeding is genetically bad? Did humans figure this out in eons past? The problem is, incest taboos don't align that well with biology or gene theory. Some violate genetic wisdom (royal families), others go far, far beyond what is necessary (seven degrees of separation in Medieval European marriage).

The answer to the "why" is not forthcoming. But what it shows us is that biology doesn't answer every question about the family or gender and sexuality, even if it does trace some large outlines to the shape of the human lifecycle. It is hard to overstate the importance of breastfeeding, for example, in the shape of human families prior to the invention of formula and breast pumps. As we'll see, technology plays a massive role in transforming families... far more than morality itself could ever do.

But far from a rigorous patriarchy as the only norm in human family history, the evidence of prehistoric (pre-state, pre-urban, and thus pre-written) peoples shows convincingly that hunter gatherers were relatively egalitarian.⁶ Again, this phase of the history of *homo sapiens* represents 95-99% of the existence of our species. They were relatively egalitarian for a number of reasons. Firstly, they lived in smaller groups, and it takes economies of scale and systems of anonymity to systematically exploit the labor of others. Secondly, they were generally migratory (again Abraham!), following prey, fruit, or practicing shifting agriculture. This meant everyone had to be generalists and contribute to various chores at various times. Thirdly, they were relatively egalitarian because the women did not conceive and reproduce as frequently, given lower infant mortality (due in large part to better diets and balanced lifestyles of mothers), and so women were also less confined to only reproductive functions. And finally, the average work week of hunter-gatherers has been estimated to average around 20 hours or less (a number also quoted for medieval European peasants), thus making this form of life, contrary to popular scientific depictions, relatively safe and leisurely, at least when compared to the mass slavery that would follow it in the great empires of history.

So, while all of life was about the *oikos*, the family, the household, and the whole “economy” was family-oriented, this doesn’t seem to indicate that people were predestined by biology. Culture, tradition, and taboo were all part of gender and sexuality, even though by and large gender and sexuality remained firmly binary and reproductive-functional.

Political Animals

One major technology that revolutionized human society was the invention of an urbanized, agrarian society along with the attendant structures of organization we typically call a “state.” Along with farming, cities, and states there arose caste systems and structures of human inequality. Families did not have or need “kings,” instead they might have developed chief, but many retained council-based decision making-structures (elders). Inequality in tribal people groups differed culturally. Some groups might have been rigidly

⁶ See James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 5.

patriarchal. Others, like the Haida people of Haida Gwaii, an island off the coast of British Columbia, were and are matriarchal. But by and large, pre-state humans were, according to anthropologists, “broadly egalitarian.”

But agriculture and cities and states generally exist only where significant structural inequalities exist. After all, it is only by farmers producing surplus that is then taken from them by landlords that landlords can exist as a class at all. The idle rich, the aristocracy, is thus as old as farming, and their presence in classical political societies that formed the Western tradition is noted in almost every name that survives from Ancient Greece. All of the great beacons of civilization were built on slave labor. And this development of fairly rigid social stratification created very different kinds of living conditions, ideas of the family, and thus of gender and sex.

The radical shift in economics from nomadism and shifting agriculture to settled agriculture transformed property away from shared tribal resources and toward private property. Settled agriculture requires long term investment and care of land, and so the creation of rigid boundaries and ideas of ownership helped create and solidify wealth differences within a society. It also created the vital concept of inheritance, which marriage would function to secure. Inheritance was not just a factor of a small farm, of course, but also whole kingdoms. Cultural rules about inheritance might differ, but the end result was largely the same: marriage began to take on the function of creating legitimate heirs. It is hard to overstate the importance of inheritance from a political point of view. Stable inheritance laws based on fairly clear and rigid martial laws facilitate long-term property distribution without having to constantly resort to probate courts.

Marriage as the source of producing legitimate heirs thus shows how different standards began to exist for those with significant property, and those without. Polygamy and the keeping of a harem or concubines has always been a prerogative of the rich. Solomon’s massive female entourage (700 wives, 300 concubines) was as much a show of wealth and political power as it was a function of his sexual immoderation. Similarly, it is unlikely that in Abraham’s massive household there were many others who could have multiple wives. His decision to go separate ways from his nephew Lot revolved around the size of their entourages and the competition it introduced, a similar issue we can see in Jacob’s relationship with his father-in-law Laban.

The irony of inheritance as part of the basis for marriage is that it means both poor and rich can access forms of sexual liberty impossible for those in the middle. For those with nothing to lose and nothing to leave for posterity, rigid monogamy is detached from its legal and economic basis, meaning that a settled lifestyle with a single partner lacks many of the other plausibility structures present for middle class and wealthy people. At the same time, the aristocracy or modern corporate oligarchy likewise purchase sexual liberty with wealth. Provided a worthy heir is secured or one's property has some other plan of distribution, the need for settled lifelong monogamy is slight. The ultra elite have always enjoyed sex as recreation, from ancient Greek pederasty to the corruption of the high medieval Roman Catholic Church, and to modern figures whose sex lives fuel an entire industry of tabloids, and whose shocking abuses come with names like Harvey Weinstein or Jeffery Epstein. Even those not obviously engaged in abuse still may have a string of divorces and children with many partners, like Donald Trump or Elon Musk.

So, as marriage moved into the state and took on the role of property-distribution method, we can see that it created different pressures for different social classes. This is the origin of the so-called "middle class morality" also known as "bourgeois morality." The morality of the middle class has been closely tied to lifelong monogamy in large part because the middle-class nuclear family might run a small to medium business that would traditionally be passed from father to son, and which could support a limited family unit economically. Unsurprisingly, then, Christianity often came to be associated with bourgeois morality because it fits the virtues of moderation, chastity, thrift, and a healthy home life.

Social marriage was a widespread social or civic duty of every individual in pre-Christian times, and the refusal of marriage or failure to get married would carry shame or even moral culpability, except in rare circumstances like temple virgins, whose rigid isolation from regular society should remind us of the isolation of menstruating women whose blood was seen as a source of power now contained in a temple.

Thus, the rise of the city, the state, and stable property transforms marriage into a settled state itself, with expectations of the production of legitimate heirs, while acknowledging the need, especially for the rich, to use the poor for sexual gratification. It is not hard to see how gender ideas and roles would also change to fit these situations. Prostitution may have been one of

the few ways in which poor women could gain control of a bleak destiny, with life in a convent during the Middle Ages often the only alternative for a single poor woman. A farmer's wife would have always, as now, played key roles in aiding on the farm. A merchant's wife may have helped with business, or as in ancient Greece and Rome, might have been kept largely in the home, attending to household management of servants and supplies. And the wealthy, nobility, or aristocratic women might display a degree of sexual liberty, perhaps with a view to advancement through partnering with a powerful man. But these are vast generalizations. Exceptions would abound, and the faith of a person in any of these situations might orient their lives in counter-plausible ways.

Where was the church in all this? Up until the 1400's in Europe, it was largely on the sideline, preaching about celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage and making a sacrament of each form. But the church did not police morality, especially not of the poor. And the church was often subject to political pressure from the elites. Major Reformation politicians like Henry VIII of England and Philipp I, Landgrave of Hesse (a champion of the Reformation in Germany), each engaged in bigamy. Philipp I threatened the theologians Luther, Bucer, and Melanchthon with abandoning the Reformation, and thus their political protection, if they did not offer justification for a second marriage. He claimed his first wife smelled bad and was often drunk, but had no legitimate cause for divorce. They advised him, though he was notoriously lecherous, to chastity, but if not, then to marry a second wife in secret and treat her as a concubine "for it is not uncommon for princes to keep concubines."⁷ While Luther clearly states that the intention from creation was for monogamy, from the time of Lamech the practice of polygamy had been tolerated and even assumed in Deuteronomy. Luther observes, "What was allowed concerning marriage in the Law of Moses is not forbidden in the gospel." Unfortunately for the theologians, while they advised secrecy, Philipp I couldn't have cared less, and held a public wedding, causing a large scandal that discredited the Reformation in many parts of Europe.

The church did not officiate weddings for most of its history, and even when it did, it focused most of its effort on the wealthy. Thus, it is a relatively modern phenomenon that churches are expected to marry individuals on behalf of the state, especially for those without much of any property.

⁷ Martin Luther, "Letter to Landgrave Philipp of Hesse (1539)" in Martin Luther, *The Essential Luther*, trans. Tryntje Helfferich (Cambridge: Hackett, 2018), 292.

Premodern peasant Europeans generally practiced common law marriage. And the act of sexual intercourse itself was seen, in Roman Catholic sacramental theology, as the act of marriage itself. This is, in part, because all sex was potentially procreative, and thus the act of sexual intercourse was, in potentiality, the initiation of a family. The expectation that a man would have to stick around for the offspring was a serious innovation that the church brought to the welfare of women who otherwise might have no other support outside of dangerous abortions or infanticide, practices that are attested in Medieval Europe and more widespread in areas of stronger pagan influence.⁸

Ideological and Technological Marriage

The world in which marriage formed the bedrock of a society based on the inheritance of private property has largely passed away, to be replaced by a world of intentional social engineering. While private property obviously still exists, we typically own less and less real income-generating property and more consumer goods and subscriptions that are not highly valuable, durable, or even owned. In a sense, as the middle class has been deprived of large stake ownership of political society by owning significant means of production, so too has the importance of the family and a stable marriage declined.

But intentional social engineering to break the family apart for ideological reasons was not an invention of Communism. As far as we know, it was Plato who first described an ideological and idealized city-state in which the elites are those with the greatest merit (philosopher kings and ‘the guardians’). In Plato’s ideal republic, marriage and children were common. Children would be tested for merit and raised by the state to be assigned to an appropriate place based on merits. Plato’s ideal in having communal children was not just an ancient form of eugenics, it was an engineer’s approach to human society. Aldous Huxley picked up on many of Plato’s ideas and described them in then-modern terms in the early 20th century in his seminal dystopian book *Brave New World*. Huxley describes a world in which sex is encouraged even between children as pure recreation. Actual childbearing and nursing however is viewed as disgusting, and all children are lab-grown, and eugenically sorted into social castes as in vitro embryos. Orgies are often

⁸ For more on the history of abortion see our book *Life: Theological Resources* (2022).

compulsory in Huxley's dystopia, as they are in Plato's *Republic*, and this is because he realized the power of instrumentalizing sex for the state's own power.

What Plato and Huxley understood equally was that marriage is bad political engineering. If a large group wants to instrumentalize a whole society, it has to strip the *oikos*, the household, of all its power and property. While this might seem fairly obvious with Communism and authoritarianism, as with China's infamous and disastrous "One Child Policy," the reality is that modern technology is a similar social engineering project that finds marriage a hindrance. And while dystopian novels have portrayed the future of sex in various ways, I believe Huxley was somewhat correct in seeing sex as made recreational. The best and most efficient form of domination is frictionless. People must love their lives and their world and continue to find hope in the narratives put forward about progress and liberation. That these narratives are propaganda matters little. Propaganda is simply a necessary part of organized technical society,⁹ be it authoritarian or democratic.¹⁰ In order for technological progress people must have their life narratives transformed from producing offspring and towards productive careers. True freedom is found in leaving the homestead, the house, and finding oneself in one's "vocation" or career field.¹¹ This form of storytelling is itself endemic of the technological society, and it is one in which reproduction has to be a choice, due to the immensity of the friction a family causes in career development, especially for women.

Thus, it is within a technological society that sex is recreational. And where sex is recreational, gender is nonfunctional. That is, gender is transformed from *essential* to one's life story in the attainment of the desired outcome of family life, toward an *aesthetic* choice of self-presentation that must

⁹ Technical society is not the same as technology, as in objects like smartphones. The technical society is a whole worldview in which all things are submitted to "technique" or the one best way of getting things done.

¹⁰ See Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Vintage Books, 1973); Peter K. Fallon, *Propaganda 2.1: Understanding Propaganda in the Digital Age* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2024).

¹¹ Much can and should be said about the potential toxicity of vocational theology present in the "Work and Worship" movement. The notion that God is the one who ordains through providence the economy and has a special calling for everyone in that economy is a radically anti-family theology.

have no bearing on the ability to attain career success. Functional gender equality makes gender *performative*, that is, part of the realm of theater. Performative gender is confined largely to superficial presentation, surface-level appearance. While some few trans people might seek gender reassignment surgery, we can foresee that this is but a temporary stage on the road toward a gender nihilism of which “non-binary” already shows the first signs. Why is that?

Consider gender stereotypes and the stories that they fit within. Alpha males seek to dominate, to display sexual prowess and muscular strength. But true alpha males only exist in herd or pack species like wolves, lions, bovines, or sheep, where their superior strength translated directly into reproductive privileges and leadership responsibility. Alpha masculinity that has been divorced from ancient patriarchal tribalism does not seek to father and support many children. True alpha males seek not the act of sex, but the outcome of begetting offspring. The road to social power is now not through having many offspring, but through technological, political, and entrepreneurial skills, many of which have nothing to do with muscle mass, testosterone levels, nutrition plans, gun ownership, big truck driving, or other forms of performative masculinity. It is in this way that the myth of the alpha male is now considered *toxic* by some in our culture, because it is purely performative and provides no appreciable social good within society as it is now constituted. Indeed, so counterproductive is alpha masculinity that the technological society is “feminizing” men in a form of adaptation to the technical necessities of our time. High testosterone levels that produce aggression create useless conflict. Masculinity has been domesticated or made docile by the better functioning of a technological society. Airline pilots must do things by the book, following standard operating procedures. This is true even in the military where discipline, tactics, technical planning, and technological advantage are far superior to courage, aggression, or brute strength. And this means traditional masculinity is made performative, confined to the realm of entertainment—weightlifting competitions, cage-match fights, motorsports, and athletics. Success in the economic world encourages what might be seen as stereotypically feminization—submission to bosses, hairless bodies, docile attitudes, conflict avoidance, finding meaning in the loving affirmation of others.

Similarly, traditional femininity with its stereotypical focus on cultivating the attraction of the right kind of man, and on the development of homemaking skills makes sense where a woman's life story revolves around finding the right mate, producing many and quality children, and training them up for success in the wider world. Stories of this kind of femininity are as old as literature itself, as are stories of *femme fatales*, sorceresses who by the power of their extreme attraction and magic, use sex to corrupt men and potentially effeminize them, most obvious in the story of Samson and Delilah, but present in ancient Greece as well in Odysseus with Circe and Heracles with Omphale. Thus, modern femininity is often performative as well, given that the attraction of a lifelong mate who will father many children is rarely the narrative of a woman's life in the wider world. Rather, beauty is now mainly aesthetic rather than focused on relational virtues. While I certainly understand the feminist critique of those who say women who are raped were "asking for it" by means of their appearance and behavior, the reason for this political conflict of where the responsibility for attraction lies (in the woman or the man), demonstrates that modern feminism sees that one's appearance is one's right, one's choice, and has no common sexual function of seeking intercourse. Thus, a woman has the right to be "sexy" without that being connected to having sex. And this functional break between femininity and reproduction shows how performative gender has become for women.

But the problem with the break between sexy and sex, between strength and sexual domination, is that our society is struggling to reconcile traditional and even biological coding related to human sex differences with the uselessness of gender in economic life. Male and female in previous societies were not "identities" that one chose or was given. A man was a man, a woman was a woman by nature of their biological sex and their social functions based on that biological fact. A future in which biological sex and economic life have no necessary connection is a future of gender nihilism. Some degree of this understanding was already present in the science fiction-oriented androgyny of e.g. David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust character of the early 1970s. Trends are toward the elimination of gender as an identification. The rise of "non-binary" identity choices of younger people speaks toward a realization that performative gender does not have to be accepted as a fact. One need not choose a predetermined set of aesthetics around self-presentation. The irony, of course, is that non-binary is not a gender identity at all, but the rejection of

gender entirely, and with it, the rejection of biological sex as a major factor of human familial, social, and political life.

While this might sound overblown, consider that it is entirely plausible for people to never experience the natural world outside of the city. Estimates vary, but the number of children who have never seen a cow, or witnessed live animal reproduction is a significant majority. For children who engage the world primarily through digital devices, the natural world is a simulation, and the technological world is their primary environment. This has become so much the case that the phrase “touch grass” is used by technologically engaged younger people to indicate an experience where they connected with the natural world outside of machines, which is out of the ordinary for them. In this environment, biological sex is simply not a major factor in how one shapes the story of one’s life. The result of living into the stereotypes of performative gender found in beauty influencers or alpha male influencers or rejecting these with a non-binary notion, makes gender revolve around consumer choice, and thus, arbitrariness.

Now, it would be a mistake to characterize this situation as *moral*. There has not been a global conspiracy against the traditional family or the connection between biological sex and gender. These are “lagging indicators” or symptoms of underlying realities.

Mass Society: The Rise of Gender Identity

In contrast to writers like Carl Trueman,¹² the way in which we arrived in our current situation was not because of famous thinkers like Nietzsche. Famous philosophers rarely set trends, they usually recognize the near future far sooner than laypeople. Nietzsche is a perfect example of this. His whole “God is dead” thing was a statement of fact of the 19th century in Europe, not some claim that he was innovating the decline of God in society. Nietzsche recognized a sociological truth of his time. Now, those who are talking about gender in ways uncomfortable to Christians in our time are doing similarly. While there is certainly political will behind the LGBT movement, it is not as though its propaganda and social pressure alone could create the situation we’re in. Counter-factual propaganda is very hard to sell. Rather, propaganda works

¹² In Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022).

because it is entirely plausible to so many people. Propaganda works by shifting *interpretation* of facts, not making up new facts.¹³

The notion that someone “has” an identity is a modern concept. People of previous generations simply did not have the need of choosing an identity, either as something to put on, or something to perform. Rather, they were defined by their communities, or social relationships. Because family is forever, as is a nation-state, identity was always described by means of one’s relations to one’s family, one’s people, and then to the world. This means the notion of choosing or finding an identity as an individual quest suggests that the old modes of identity have been well and truly broken down. We could point to the Industrial Revolution as a large part of this disembedding of individual from people. The large-scale move from farm to factory, from country to city, radically disrupted ties to land and to family, reorienting peoples’ lives and livelihoods to corporations and neighborhoods. For this not to be seen as simple “wage slavery” as it was called at the time (e.g. Adam Smith), there had to be a degree of social mobility possible. And when people began to define themselves by an openness to a career choice, a vocation, a calling, within certain industries with the ability to move between employers, suddenly an individual’s economic life was largely tied to personal choices. Likewise, because so much employment requires performativity—taking on a professional appearance, displaying professionalism in attitude and demeanor, speaking with the right accent and use of the right vocabulary—the ground had been prepared most of a person’s life to be a learned set of performances. Public life is already a theater,¹⁴ losing ourselves in the parts we are playing constantly is the most plausible outcome. Those parts that really mattered were the ones that secured a living. Those that were more arbitrary were the forms of recreation people found to fill their time off.

Thus, performativity is an essential feature of technological life. The ability to mold oneself into the image of success is the key to success—“fake it till you make it.” Or in other words, “perform it until you are it.” In this

¹³ “The truth that pays off is in the realm of *facts*. The necessary falsehoods, which also pay off, are in the realm of *intentions* and *interpretations*.” Ellul, *Propaganda*, 53. (emphases original).

¹⁴ “All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts...” Shakespeare, *As You Like It*.

way, identity becomes detached from social relationships, primarily, and fixed on self-development into the right kind of person who can succeed in a field.

This performativity creates an earnest desire for “authenticity.” People tend to talk a lot about things they desire but do not have. Authenticity is entirely lacking in a technological world because employees are designed to be replaceable. The more we cultivate ourselves into successful specialists, the more replaceable we are. And thus, the supreme irony of modern society is that the harder we work, the less we are “ourselves.” We demand identity because we have none, and we yearn for authenticity because everything is superficial.

Sociologists of the mid-20th century used to speak about “mass society” and “massification.” These words have fallen by the wayside and are replaced by a false dichotomy between individualism and community. There have almost never been true, ideological individualists. Those who come nearest to it are related to the movements of Existentialism and Personalism like Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Emmanuel Mounier, Bernard Charbonneau, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. Instead, as many of those authors identified, people tend to act like herd animals. They imitate one another. René Girard (1923-2015) was one more recent thinker who highlighted the problem of imitation as the central aspect of human behavior and identity formation. But, while people have always learned and identified through imitation of each other, the 20th century and now our own 21st are rife with global forms of imitation through mass media and now social media. Mass society massifies imitation, creating trends and movements that rise and fall rapidly. The journey of self-identification generally revolves around how one can cobble together oneself based on available options (*bricolage*) in imitation of influencers or trends, or in rebellion against such. As Charles Taylor writes of the “instrumental society,” “The individual has been taken out of a rich community life and now enters instead into a series of mobile, changing, revocable associations, often designed merely for highly specific ends. We end up relating to each other through a series of partial roles.”¹⁵

What would we expect would happen to the family, to marriage, gender, and sexuality in the midst of all this? That it would be about finding

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 585.

oneself, being authentic, gaining an identity, shouldn't be surprising. Sex is now just one more factor in creating an artificial self we try on to simulate authenticity and regain a sense of a community belonging through the only way we now know how—through instrumentalized “partial roles” defined and prepackaged by international trends and fashions.

This also means railing against certain philosophers or gnostic heresies endemic in our time is fairly useless. People identify themselves by gender and sex consumer choices not because of Michel Foucault, but because we live and move and have our being within a technological world.

LGBT as Symptom of Disempowerment

All this about performativity also means that the rise of the LGBT movement is, in spite of its rhetoric, not a movement of liberation, but a desperate example of an atomized society, broken into billions of individuals and reconstituted into identities through consumer goods and an assemblage of virtual communities.

Stories need heroes and villains, sidekicks, supporters, and more. Every good storyteller knows that you don't just add extra characters who do nothing. Rather, great stories show that characters are meaningful as they change their world and as they themselves are changed in the process. While not the nicest term we could use, “social capital” speaks to the share any individual has in making a difference in his or her world. We call it social capital because modern people have even translated meaningful relationships into forms of ownership and means of production. In any case, what we find is that modern society has a vastly uneven distribution of social capital. Let's work with this mathematical language for a moment.

In a small town of 1000 voting adults, each person has .1% of the vote. In a city of 10 million voters, each person has .000001% of the vote. If there is a significant issue on the ballot, the large city will have to resort to political parties, candidates, large-scale advertising campaigns, corporate influence, and more. An individual's social capital revolves around how he or she can be a power-player among a minority of elites. In the small town, however, the voice of only 10 people together influences an entire point of the vote. A coalition of 500 people, say all the churchgoers in town, could basically command an election. Individuals have significantly more influence on a small scale. And this means that, as we tell the story of our lives, if all our time is spent in large-

scale situations, we must become part of a movement or coalition to find that our lives have influence. That is, the larger the scale, the more likely we need to find ourselves in artificial identities. If we couple voting with other forms of social influence, like money, the effect of wealth disparity further heightens the lack of social capital that any individual might have. Within such a situation, regardless of the form of government, individuals tend to not feel a sense of ownership of the community, and where there is no ownership or investment, there is also little meaning.

In situations where individuals feel little ability to make a meaningful difference in the world, they must turn towards ever smaller canvases upon which they can paint their self-portrait. For the elite, people like Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk, can build private rockets or transform the entire night sky with their blanket of internet satellites. Others can transform a nation's political narrative. Still others can found small businesses, or become internet influencers. Middle-class people might try to express themselves on the canvas of the house, doing renovations while watching home improvement shows. Poor people with steady incomes might personalize their cars. But many poor people will also find that the only canvas they have upon which to express their identity is their own flesh. The use of the body as the primary vehicle to express one's identity is a symptom of disempowerment. Even where tattoos or bumper stickers commemorate a deceased loved one, we might consider how this indicates the loss both of graveyards and a custom for visiting with the deceased in a specific place in the world. In other words, the less of the world we own, the more likely we aim to make meaning by impacting our bodies themselves.

So, as disempowered people aim to express identity through their body, the modification of it or the intentional challenge of cultural expectation through deviant use of the body, can be a means of expressing an attempted empowerment. Hence, deviant sexuality has often been used as a means of protest, just as body modification has as well. Social outcasts who have no prospect toward social inclusion and meaningful impacts may thus aim to own their deviance by creating a subgroup, often transforming the insults of the mainstream into a badge of honor. From words like "Yankee" to "queer," "gay," or even racial slurs like the n-word, the appropriation of the term and its use with pride is a power play that begins to cement a division.

Reconciliation or Normalization

All of this sociology is useful to help paint a picture of why things are the way they are with gender and sexuality. It also helps Christians appraise what plausible actions can be taken within the church and within society, and which will only further divisions by the creation of enemies. Part of the narrative of the LGBT movement is the psychologization of homosexuality and its labelling in previous versions of the DSM as a clinical pathology. Thus, Foucault points to psychology for transforming deviant sexual behavior into a negative identity or disability which society took active steps to criminalize and normalize through therapeutic methods. The reaction to this was to create a coalition of people who found in each other a mutual cause of taking pride in an identity that they claimed was not a pathology but a legitimate diversity.

This is a story of exclusion, and a fight for inclusion. And it's a story of culture war in which inclusion required changing the narrative of the majority culture to accept LGBT people as a diverse form of normalcy. And with that change of cultural narrative comes an entirely different social vision of what sex and gender are and are for, one in which sex and gender are largely chosen, performative, and recreational; rather than reproductive, economic, and formative.

In all of this, it seems that the LGBT movement is a symptom of a technological society. And in that sense, it seems that they are “on the side of history” from a sociological perspective. At the same time, victory for the LGBT movement will also lead to its dissolution. We've already seen that “non-binary” is a move toward gender nihilism, and trends are that younger people aren't having sex very often. The rise of pornography, social media, and their attendant isolation means that people are finding sexual gratification outside of any form of social identity or togetherness. Sex will, like many other aspects of life, gravitate toward frictionless forms, both in practice and in relationality. Whatever version of sex one chooses, historically it has involved other people. If South Korea and Japan show a potential trend of shut-ins, the *hikikomori*, there is a growing generational trend towards isolation and social disempowerment.

In all this the gospel of reconciliation presents some powerful potential inroads into a world of increasing social stratification, loneliness, addiction to unreality through the internet and social media, and the implausibility of family life.

Towards Ecclesial Solutions

The purpose of this chapter was to demonstrate that morality and ethics are insufficient to address the many factors that contribute to the reason why gender and sexuality are what they are today. Preaching against LGBT or for some “traditional” image of the family (which one?) does not address almost any of the reasons why someone might choose to identify with the LGBT coalition, or even with a non-binary identity. Instead, the church needs to become a community that can both make a Christian vision of marriage plausible and attractive; as well as providing an alternate story of meaning to those who feel disempowered by the world. Churches need to be communities where outcasts can find reconciliation in discipleship. Much more needs to be said about these things in another chapter, but the point is that, unless the church becomes far more than a worship event institution, it will be systematically unable to make a meaningful impact on the social transformations that have created the world we now inhabit.

Chapter 11

Offering the Fullness of Grace: Allowing the Philosophy of Charles Taylor to Help Us Reach the “Buffered Self”

Rev. Dr. Eric Laverentz

Amid the flurry of cultural clashes—the never-ending battle between peoples, nations, worldviews and religions—no alliance may be as strange as the support of the LGBT community for Hamas. The slogan, “Queers for Palestine” is ubiquitous at Pro-Palestine/ Anti-Israel rallies.

What is particularly surprising about this supposed alliance is that non-heterosexual lifestyles are strictly forbidden in many nations run by some Muslims, particularly those who oversaw the massacre of more than 1200 people in Israel. Iran, who funds and oversees Hamas, is one of ten nations where same-sex homosexual relationships are punishable by death. The others are all Muslim dominated as well: Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Nigeria, Somalia, Mauritania, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Pakistan and Afghanistan. In many more Muslim countries same sex relationships are criminalized by imprisonment or even beatings.

At the same time, Israel is considered by far the most progressive country in the Middle East when it comes to rights for sexual minorities. Not only is homosexuality legal but same-sex marriages performed overseas have been recognized in Israel since 2006. Pride Month is celebrated throughout Israel, with 250,000 gathering in Tel Aviv—by far the largest such event throughout Asia or Africa. I frequently travel to Israel in June and have had my travel plans diverted by Pride marches filling the streets of Jerusalem on more than one occasion.

So, why would a gay, lesbian or transgender individual or ally support an ideology that doesn’t recognize their humanity and right to exist against one who at least tolerates them?

No doubt there is some ignorance involved and if these facts were laid out for those bearing a “Queers for Palestine” sign, it might give at least some pause—as some guerilla journalists have demonstrated. But the fact that an alliance between parties who should be enemies against someone who is friendly to one sheds light upon the convictions that lie beneath.

It is also helpful to the Church to understand these convictions and how they might inform our ministry to the sexually broken.

To address this question, I want to use the philosophy of Charles Taylor, one of the most influential thinkers of the last 20 years in the arena of defining secularism. Taylor's most influential book, *A Secular Age*, is a landmark work whose impact extends far beyond its readership because its depth and breadth (at over 800 pages) far outstrip the ability of most to read, including pastors. And this is a shame because Taylor's diagnosis of this 'secular age' can be helpful to the Church. Taylor spells out the exact nature of his project, "The change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible to not believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one possibility among others."¹

James K.A. Smith, the Calvin College professor, who authored a briefer guide to *A Secular Age* shared the importance for the Church of understanding Taylor's "map of a globalized Gotham, a philosophical ethnography of our present."² Smith asks, "So what does it look like to bear witness in a secular age? What does it look like to be faithful? To what extent have Christians unwittingly absorbed the tendencies of this world?"

These are important questions for Christians who struggle in a world in which God is one option among many and the Church, for many, is at once strange and invisible—like a sewing machine someone stumbles across in a musty antique mall.

To understand Taylor properly we must begin with how he defines "secular." Taylor's project orbits around this definition offering three options, two of which are fairly boilerplate: 1) a sphere differentiated from the sacred, 2) a decline of belief in God or religious practice, and 3) secular as a cultural context in which religious belief has come to be "understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."³ It is this third option that has the most implications.

Taylor is not particularly concerned with the terms of belief or, to put it another way, what creeds we confess or do not confess—the ground upon

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap, 2007), 3.

² James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 3.

³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

which the debate most frequently lands. We might call this ideology, for example, science versus religion. He does not seek to identify what people think, but instead “what we take for granted.”⁴ Taylor shifts the focus to the conditions of belief, experience and the quest to orient ourselves morally and spiritually. This is a pursuit Taylor claims to be inescapable for believer and unbeliever alike. Taylor labels this as the search for ‘fullness’:

We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place of power; we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring. Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition, e.g., of peace of wholeness; to be able to act on that level. Of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness. But sometimes there will be moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfillment, where we feel ourselves there.⁵

Two points are important here. First, Taylor’s understanding of the need for fullness is what undergirds all humanity’s quest to orient ourselves morally and spiritually. His third definition of secularism tells us that no longer is religion or more particularly, a belief in god or the transcendent seen as the *sine qua non* of the quest to orient ourselves. Going beyond Taylor’s assertions, where this leaves us is adrift in a free market of ideas in which one is no better than any other, where no one can say definitively what meaning has the most utility for all. Whatever philosophy or practice that has the most meaning for me at this particular time or place is what I choose to solve my personal existential crisis. In a free market of ideas, it is the individual who is their own highest authority. Some may see this as a departure from previous generations but the Bible teaches us this is the human dilemma, our sinful struggle to submit to God’s will. What is different in our current context is that pleasing ourselves above all has become the first, most accepted, readily embraced social option. Upward mobility, greater access to opportunity, wealth, travel, information, and entertainment that we take for granted has heightened our

⁴ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 28.

⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 5.

individualism because it is very feasible (and has been for as long as most can remember) for people to live on their own without immediate assistance from a family or community.

Second, although Taylor never says this explicitly, a Christian understanding of a search for fullness presumes that all humanity naturally feels something less than ‘full’ or ‘whole.’ Every woman or man who has ever existed is aware of their brokenness at some level. Reconciling this brokenness is the greatest crisis they will face. In some sense W.E.B. DuBois’ famous words about the dilemma of being Black in America apply to every human being: “An American, a Negro ever feels his twoness, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”⁶ There is a twoness at work in every woman or man—the revealed self, whose “sin is ever before me”⁷ and the self that is made whole, whose full potential is realized. In other words, there is the self who experiences life as it is and there is the self who yearns for life as it could be. The gap between those two shifting points we experience as pain. Our current life and the life we yearn for are at war in our body. And how we choose to deal with that pain is the most important question of our life. How do we close the gap between these two selves and mitigate our pain?

Accounting for this pain impacts how we orient ourselves to the world around us and how we do that has changed significantly. Taylor draws a distinction in the pre-modern (up to 500 years ago) and modern self of where we instinctively look for answers. Taylor’s concern is not to delineate so much what we consciously choose to believe but what we don’t even consider, the philosophical air we instinctively breathe. Taylor claims that the pre-modern self was ‘porous’ and the modern self is ‘buffered.’ The simplest way to understand this is that the pre-modern self was predisposed to look outside itself and believed itself susceptible to a range of influences (spirits, demons, gods, magic, blessings, curses) from without whereas the modern self intuitively looks within.

To illustrate these two selves, Taylor draws a distinction between how a porous and buffered self would interpret a case of melancholy. The porous, pre-modern self would be open to the idea, even as a first option, that their

⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Newburyport: Dover, 1994).

⁷ Psalm 51:3.

melancholy is black bile. Black bile is not merely the cause of melancholy, like an infection might create a fever, is melancholy. A porous emotional life is susceptible to spirits both good and evil as well as “things which have no wills, but are nevertheless redolent with the evil meanings.”⁸

The buffered, modern self is entirely different:

See the contrast. A modern self is feeling depressed, melancholy. He is told: it's just your body chemistry, you're hungry, or there is a hormone malfunction, or whatever. Straightaway, he feels relieved. He can take distance from this feeling which is ipso facto declared not justified. Things don't really have this meaning: it just feels this way, which is the result of a causal action utterly unrelated to the meanings of things.... But a pre-modern (buffered self) may not be helped by learning that his mood comes from black bile. Because this doesn't permit a distancing. Black bile is melancholy. Now he just knows that he's in the grip of the real thing.⁹

Taylor's assertion is that the modern, buffered self is the default cultural position. The buffered self is the perspective we take for granted, the philosophical air that fills our lungs. The default position for our modern woman or man, according to Taylor, is that he or she “can form the ambition of engaging from whatever is beyond the boundary, and of giving its own autonomous order to its life. The absence of fear (of outside influences) can be not just enjoyed, but seen as an opportunity for self-control or self-direction.”¹⁰

Taylor does not say this is the way things always go. As moderns we are not automatically a ‘buffered’ self but it is a possibility, maybe even our first possibility.

What are the implications of this?

First, and most obvious, one of those ‘exterior forces’ whom we can choose or not choose to acknowledge is God—even to the point of denying his existence. The buffered self perceives the ability to be separated from God and everything God promises or commands. Because God is not real, he obviously has no authority in his or her life and by the same token, God's blessings no longer have any benefit. The buffered self perceives the ability to go it alone as and choose to close the gap between what is and what can be, between their current life and the one they desire, in whatever way they see fit. The buffered

⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 37.

⁹ Taylor, 37.

¹⁰ Taylor, 38–39.

self, by definition, perceives themselves to be a moral free agent—even if they are impacted by far more sources than they admit.

Second, the buffered self, unconvinced of any exterior forces' ability to impact his or her existence is forced to discern what resources they possess and wield which will close the gap between present reality and future possibility. They may, of course, look to relationships with others to fill the gap, but even this is fraught with peril as they are putting their hope in another human being who is necessarily on a similar quest. Rarely do relationships rise above the health of each individual member.

Third, the buffered self must seek a model of what their desired life should look like. We know, all too well, our current state—for good or for ill and usually the latter. What is more difficult to perceive is how we operationalize our longing for a better life. We need a model. We need someone or something to which to aspire. For the Christian this is easy. We are “to grow into the fullness of the measure of the stature of Christ.”¹¹ And we are given an abundance of scriptural teachings and examples of what this ‘fullness of Christ’ looks like. For the pre-modern, the scope of knowledge and potential models for life and opportunity was considerably more limited, even if they did not immediately look to Jesus. The modern, buffered self has a nearly unlimited range of models from which to choose—a great many of which are either unrealistic or media fabrications.

Taylor, who is prolific at coining phrases, has a name for this process by which the buffered self seeks to close the gap between what is and what can be through their immediate world, “immanentization.” In the process of immanentization, ultimate meaning and purpose is ascribed to the natural and material world.

Taylor outlines several ‘anthropocentric shifts’ of this important philosophical change. For the purposes of this essay, we will focus on the second—what Taylor calls ‘the eclipse of grace.’ Taylor describes this shift by first detailing what used to be:

The order God designed was there for reason to see. By reason and discipline, humans could rise to the challenge and realize it. Now even those orthodox thinkers in the past who might have agreed with such a high view of the power of reason would have wanted to add at this point that the full

¹¹ Eph 4:13.

measure of good will required for carrying out the programme of rational discipline, given our fallen condition, required God's grace. Without this always being denied, it fades in the spiritual climate I'm calling "Deist."¹²

Here we depart from Taylor somewhat whose Catholic roots and natural theology leanings are showing. As Reformed Christians, dependent upon grace because of our sinful nature, we rightly recognize the limits of reason in discerning God. So, I find his assertion here puzzling, which seems to collapse common grace and prevenient grace. But he does hit closer to the mark a little later when describing the 'eclipse of grace' as being able to accept neither the rewards or pains of God's revelation. In the 'buffered self' whose existence is entirely self-contained, there is no role for grace.¹³

The eclipse of grace is not a major idea in Taylor's expansive panoply of multifaceted concepts, but it is a good representation of the shift Taylor describes—especially for Reformed Christians. The 'eclipse of grace' embodies as well the very mindset we are trying to capture and describe. If we go a bit beyond Taylor's description, to infuse grace with a more robust understanding of this important Scriptural idea—it will help us answer our question about this strange alliance manifesting itself in a "Queers for Palestine" placard and help us to know how to minister to this demographic.

We started our description of Taylor's philosophy with the idea that all human beings seek fullness or wholeness. I have asserted that a Christian understanding of Taylor suggests this quest is made necessary because we all perceive something to be missing. There is a gap between our present reality and what we believe should be. It is not enough to call this aspirational point merely what could be. It is what we believe should be. It is that to which we believe we have a right or the circumstances otherwise demand. The gap between these points we call pain.

There are two ways to close that gap. The first is to achieve what should be—somehow or some way. The porous self, the pre-modern individual's first instinct was to look outside, beyond ourselves to find it—to God or other supernatural powers. The buffered self, the modern individual's default position is to look inside ourselves.

¹² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 222.

¹³ Taylor, 223.

What happens, however, to the modern individual when he or she discovers, as we all eventually do, that we don't have the resources to fill the gap? Either we change the paradigm and accept from beyond ourselves what we need, becoming porous, or we give up and accept what is (or perhaps something marginally better) as the best this life can offer. Taylor names this as one consequence of looking inward saying, "This prospect [loving God and his Creatures in a fulsome way] survives longest as an account of the afterlife. This transformation, which will take us beyond our limitations in this life, will be realized in another life after death."¹⁴

In other words, to close the gap between hope and an unattainable reality, anyone can seek a gift from a power beyond themselves - that is, grace - or they can accept as destiny a situation they consider untenable. But if they do the latter, their brokenness becomes a fixed, unchangeable reality that overshadows everything else in life. The brokenness, the diminishment, the fractured self becomes triumphant. In so doing, they exchange one kind of pain for another. They mitigate the pain of unmet expectations but they embrace the pain of an unresolvable question, namely: "Why don't I get what I want? Why is life so hard? Why do people suffer?"

Taylor's metaphor of the eclipse of grace, if we continue to push it further, is helpful to illuminate this point. What is most noteworthy about an eclipse is the absence of light. Where there should be light, there is darkness. What is left instead is a black hole in the sky from where the sun normally beams. Analogously, my home church in my small town moved from its historic sanctuary near the main street to a large plot of land outside of town. When they moved, they removed a large cross from the side of the historic building to take it with them. The image of the cross remained on the brick, a shadowy reminder of the purpose the building, now a day care, used to serve. Its absence said more about the future of the building and its former use than any words ever could.

One of Taylor's most astute observations is that no matter how much the buffered self looks within, it is haunted by whispers of more. A Christian would allege It's inescapable in this God-made world. No matter how much the buffered self wants to look to reason and logic and natural causes, it cannot escape the mystery and wonder that God has created. J.K. Smith summarizes

¹⁴ Taylor, 224.

this dilemma: “Taylor names and identifies what some of our best novelists, poets and artists attest to: that our age is haunted. On the one hand, we live under a brass heaven, ensconced in immanence. We live in the twilight of gods and idols. But their ghosts have refused to depart.”¹⁵

This begs the question, “What, then does the buffered self worship? What takes on the character of the holy for the modern woman or man living under that brass heaven?” The answer is simple. We worship that which is most real. We structure our lives around that which is most immanent, irrefutable and personal.

In the world of the buffered woman or man—whose greatest hopes are hidden away by an eclipse of grace—our pain takes on the character of the holy.

Distance from God and unresolved pain are at least fraternal twins, sharing some DNA.

What is the Christian response to this? What does the Church have to offer?

If we take Taylor seriously, in lives marked by an eclipse of grace, we should be compelled to offer grace in its full radiance. What does the ‘full radiance of grace mean?’ It does not mean blanket acceptance of all choices, sexual, moral, political and otherwise. It does not mean conceding to the immanent frame Taylor describes in an attempt to relate to a stunted vision of our world. It does mean surrendering to what Scripture calls sin and darkness. The ‘full radiance of grace’ means meeting people where they are and offering the fullness of life found in God’s covenant love through Christ. Taylor accurately describes piercing the buffered self and implanting in it the dream to choose the world which had been rumored, discounted and doubted but never seen.

How can Christians facilitate making the buffered self more porous? It goes without saying this is the work of the Holy Spirit but God, in his graciousness uses us. How do we, as it has been said, “Open the windows of the soul for the Spirit.”

First, we need to understand that everyone perceives the holy—even if it is only the ‘hauntings’ of a dismissed cosmology. It’s inescapable. So, let’s offer what we know to be holy. In the world Taylor describes, it is not enough

¹⁵ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 3–4.

to appeal to a holy God. We must show them. We must nearly literally place the holy in their hands so they can experience him. Theologian Rosaria Butterfield tells the story of her journey from being a secular liberal lesbian to becoming a follower of Jesus Christ, theologian and the wife of a pastor in the Presbyterian Church of America. Her transformation happened sitting around a Sunday dinner table hundreds of times with a pastor and his wife. They showed her a vision of the holy that she had not experienced through sanctified relationships. Butterfield describes how Christians must live a life that prioritizes offering ‘radical hospitality’ as a way to offer the holy and point to a new life.

Our post-Christian neighbors need to hear and see and taste and feel authentic Christianity, hospitality spreading from every Christian home that includes neighbors in prayer, food, friendship, childcare, dog walking, and the daily matters upon which friendships are built.

Take, for example, our Christian brothers and sisters who struggle with unchosen homosexual desires and longings, sensibilities and affections, temptations and capacities. Our brothers and sisters need the Church to function as the Lord called it to—as a family. Because Christian conversion always comes in exchange for the life you once loved, not in addition to it, people have more to lose in coming to Christ—and some people have more to lose than others. Some people have one cross, and others have ten to carry. People who live daily with unchosen homosexual desires also lie with a host of unanswered questions and unfulfilled life dreams.¹⁶

To effectively reach these communities, the Church must return to Biblical ideas about holiness and a transformed life that permeates the entirety of our existence—that is total call to Christ. We must be willing to model losing our life to reach those whom we are asking to lose something significant like the definition of their self. In exchange we must lay down our time, our comfort, resources, barriers, and self-righteousness. There is no limit to the number of things Jesus might call us to lay down in order to pick up our cross. We cannot venture deep into holiness carrying the baggage of this life and we certainly cannot expect others to go someplace where we are unwilling. Second, we need to understand the simultaneous power and limitations of pain and how pain, unchecked and unaddressed, binds the soul’s gaze in the

¹⁶ Rosaria Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 95.

‘immanent frame’ alone. We can respect someone’s pain and acknowledge its importance. But we must never give up the conviction that pain is a product of a broken world and not a part of the Kingdom. We must offer an alternative compelling vision of the life available to us. In short, we must learn to have more to say than just “No” to someone’s politics, perception of self or sexual expression. Revelation 21 paints the vision of the world to come and it is a world without pain:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”¹⁷

Despite the temporal nature of pain, for the reasons listed above, the temptation to define ourselves by our pain, because it can seem so overwhelmingly real, is seductive. And it is not limited to just those who consider themselves persecuted, politically or otherwise. But pain easily becomes a “counterfeit fullness,” to utilize Taylor’s term. Can the Church demonstrate true fullness to those who are tempted to allow their pain to circumscribe their existence? Can the Church demonstrate that a fullness of life exists as God enters into the immanent frame through his church? With the buffered self it is not enough to proclaim the possibility, we must also guide them along the path. We cannot merely wave from the Kingdom of Heaven across the great chasm; we must stand in the immanent frame alongside and say, “Come with me.”

Third, we must simply not condemn the old life but we must champion a new life, not as mere possibility but as a certainty.

¹⁷ Revelation 21:1-4.

Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.¹⁸

We can say that the ‘whispers of the ghosts’, whose voices the buffered self attempts to mute, are real and true. And those whispers direct us toward Someone or something beyond ourselves whose existence is confirmed by the witness of our lives. The buffered self chooses to ensconce itself in the material world because she or he inherently believes it the best path for the fullness of life. But because they live under a brass heaven, they cannot escape their past, especially the pain of their past and this leads to a truncated existence. Instead, we join the chorus of heavenly whispers and shouts that proclaim the certainty of the newness of life whose only price is leaving behind the old life. The Church does this not through looking to the past ourselves, reflexively wishing for the world we knew, trusted, survived and maybe even loved. That would serve only to affirm the immanent frame and fortify the worldview of the buffered self. Instead, we yearn for the new world, the life to come promised by the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. We can love and seek that which we do not yet know but trust will be good.

There is a more excellent way.

¹⁸ Phil 3:13-14.

Chapter 12

History of Marriage in the United States: An Analytical Perspective on Cultural Shifts, Legal Developments, and the Influence of Pop Culture

Rev. Dr. Bobby Griffith

One of the interesting, and frustrating, consequences of studying history is the reality that things change over time. Imagine my surprise when I discovered this about marriage in the United States. In working with a marriage scholar, Robert Griswold, at the University of Oklahoma, I entered a more complicated narrative of this beloved institution. This essay provides a basic overview of the ways marriage has changed over time in the United States.

Colonial Period: The Formation of Marriage as a Legal and Social Institution

The history of marriage in the United States has its roots in the colonial period, a time when marriage was primarily understood as an economic and social contract, deeply influenced by English common law, religious beliefs, and economic imperatives. During this era, marriage served as a mechanism to organize and legitimize reproduction, consolidate property, and maintain the social hierarchy.

Colonial marriage laws were crafted not only to maintain social order but also to reinforce racial hierarchies. Anti-miscegenation laws were implemented to prevent interracial marriages, particularly between White settlers and African or Native Americans. These laws, such as Virginia's 1691 statute making interracial marriage illegal, were pivotal in preserving the racial purity and social dominance of white Europeans. Thus, marriage became a tool for upholding racial segregation and the broader social structure that placed whites at the top of the hierarchy.

In this period, marriage was closely linked to property and inheritance. Women were considered the property of their fathers and later their husbands, with marriages often arranged to ensure the transfer of wealth and property

within families. The dowry system, in which a bride's family provided money, goods, or land to the groom, reinforced the notion that marriage was more about economic stability and social contracts than romantic love or personal choice.

The 19th Century: The Transition from Economic to Companionship Marriage

The 19th century marked a significant shift in the conception of marriage in the United States. As the nation underwent social, economic, and cultural transformations, marriage began to evolve from a primarily economic arrangement to one that increasingly emphasized companionship, love, and mutual support.

The 19th century witnessed the rise of the "cult of domesticity," an ideology that positioned women as the moral guardians of the home and emphasized their roles as wives and mothers. This doctrine reinforced traditional gender roles, suggesting that a woman's primary responsibility was to her husband and children. While the cult of domesticity promoted the idea of marriage as a partnership based on emotional fulfillment and companionship, it simultaneously reinforced women's legal and economic dependence on their husbands.

The Industrial Revolution played a pivotal role in these shifts. As men increasingly worked outside the home in factories and offices, the home became the woman's domain—a place of refuge and moral purity in contrast to the competitive and often corrupt world of commerce. This separation of spheres—public for men and private for women—further entrenched the idea that women's primary contributions were as caretakers and moral guides within the family.

The institution of marriage was also profoundly affected by the realities of slavery, particularly in the Southern United States. Enslaved people were not legally permitted to marry, and their unions were often not recognized by law. Slaveholders exerted control over the personal lives of enslaved people, often breaking up families by selling individuals to different plantations. Despite these harsh conditions, many enslaved people formed strong familial bonds and considered themselves married, creating their own rituals and traditions to solidify their unions in the absence of legal recognition.

The end of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery in 1865 brought about significant changes in marriage for African Americans. Formerly enslaved individuals sought to formalize their marriages, which were now recognized by the state. However, the legacy of anti-miscegenation laws persisted, with many states reinforcing or enacting new laws that prohibited interracial marriage well into the 20th century. The Freedmen's Bureau, established in 1865 to help former slaves integrate into a post-Civil War society, played a crucial role in helping newly freed African Americans register their marriages, thus legitimizing their family structures in the eyes of the law.

As the century progressed, the notion of marriage as a primarily economic contract began to wane, giving way to the idea of companionate marriage. This shift was influenced by the changing economic conditions brought about by industrialization, which allowed for greater economic independence and mobility. Middle-class ideals of romantic love and mutual respect began to shape the institution of marriage, particularly in urban areas. This period also saw the rise of the "love match," where individuals married for love rather than for financial or social gain, reflecting broader cultural shifts toward individualism and personal fulfillment.

The late 19th century also witnessed the emergence of the modern feminist movement, which challenged then-current gender roles within marriage. Women began to demand greater rights within marriage, including the right to own property, seek education, and participate in public life. These demands were part of a broader push for women's rights, including the right to vote, which would come to fruition in the early 20th century.

The Early 20th Century: Pop Culture, Gender Roles, and Economic Hardships

The early 20th century continued to witness significant transformations in marriage, driven by the cultural, economic, and social shifts of the era. Pop culture began to play a more prominent role in shaping public perceptions of marriage, while economic crises like the Great Depression and global events like World War II further influenced the institution.

The 1920s, often referred to as the Roaring Twenties, was a decade marked by cultural dynamism and the loosening of traditional social mores. This period saw the rise of jazz music, flapper culture, and the burgeoning film industry, all of which began to challenge 19th century norms of sexuality and

gender roles. Hollywood films became a powerful medium through which romantic love and sexual freedom were depicted, influencing public perceptions of marriage and relationships. The flapper, with her bobbed hair, short skirts, and liberated attitude, became a symbol of modern womanhood, challenging Victorian ideals of female modesty and domesticity.

The Great Depression of the 1930s had a profound impact on marriage and family life in the United States. Economic hardship forced many families to delay marriage and childbearing, as financial instability made it difficult to establish and maintain a household. Earlier gender roles within marriage were also challenged during this period, as women increasingly entered the employment-based workforce to help support their families. The strain of economic uncertainty led to a decline in marriage rates and an increase in desertion and informal separations, as many men, unable to fulfill their role as breadwinners, left their families.

Despite these challenges, the Great Depression also reinforced the ideal of marriage as a partnership based on mutual support and resilience. Popular culture during this period, including films and literature, often depicted marriage as a source of stability and comfort in the face of economic adversity. The hardships of the Depression thus both strained and strengthened the institution of marriage, as couples navigated the difficulties of poverty and unemployment together.

World War II: Marriage, Gender Roles, and the Post-War Boom

World War II further reshaped marriage and gender roles in the United States. The war effort required the mobilization of millions of men, many of whom married before being deployed. These wartime marriages were often hurried and based on the uncertainty of the future, leading to a post-war spike in divorce rates as couples who had married in haste found themselves incompatible.

The war also brought about significant changes in gender roles, as women took on jobs earlier held by men, including in factories and other industries critical to the war effort. This experience of economic independence and public participation began to alter women's expectations for their roles within marriage and society. The iconic image of "Rosie the Riveter"

symbolized this shift, as women proved themselves capable of performing tasks previously reserved for men.

However, the post-war period saw a concerted effort to return to traditional gender roles, as men returned from the war and reclaimed their positions in the workforce. The 1950s are often remembered as a time of domestic stability, characterized by the ideal of the nuclear family, with a breadwinner father and a homemaker mother. Marriage rates soared, and the ideal of the suburban, middle-class family became a central feature of American life. Yet, the seeds of discontent were already sown, as many women, who had tasted independence during the war, began to chafe against the constraints of domestic life.

The mid-20th century was a period of significant social upheaval, as traditional notions of marriage were increasingly challenged by the sexual revolution, the civil rights movement, and the rise of feminist and LGBTQ+ advocacy. Pop culture played a crucial role in reflecting and shaping these changes, influencing public perceptions of marriage, gender roles, and sexuality.

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the sexual revolution, a period marked by the loosening of traditional sexual norms and a growing acceptance of premarital sex and non-traditional relationships. Pop culture was central to this transformation, with music, film, and television depicting and often celebrating sexual freedom. Icons like Elvis Presley, the Beatles, and later, rock bands like Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones, challenged conservative views on sexuality, contributing to a broader cultural shift that redefined the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

The feminist movement of the 1960s also played a critical role in challenging earlier gender roles within marriage. Feminists advocated for gender equality, reproductive rights, and greater autonomy for women, both within and outside of marriage. The introduction of the birth control pill in the 1960s was a pivotal moment in this movement, giving women unprecedented control over their reproductive lives and facilitating a more open discussion about sexuality.

One of the most significant legal changes during this period was the Supreme Court's ruling in *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), which struck down all remaining anti-miscegenation laws across the country. The decision was a landmark victory for civil rights and reflected the broader social changes of the

era, including the growing recognition of racial equality. The legal strategy employed by the civil rights movement, which combined grassroots activism with strategic litigation, provided a model for later social movements, including the LGBTQ+ movement.

The parallels between the civil rights movement and the LGBTQ+ rights movement are particularly evident in the legal battles over marriage. Both movements sought to challenge discriminatory laws by appealing to the principles of equality and justice enshrined in the Constitution. The success of the civil rights movement in dismantling segregation and securing legal protections for African Americans inspired LGBTQ+ activists to adopt similar strategies in their fight for marriage equality.

This was the outflow of rights-based liberalism—a political philosophy that emphasized the protection of individual rights. Rights-based liberalism was first popularized by President Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s and made famous in his Four Freedoms address in 1941. During the 1950s, rights-based liberalism shifted to include expanded civil liberties or civil rights.

The LGBTQ+ rights movement adopted a similar approach to the African American civil rights movement, framing their struggle for marriage equality as a fight for civil rights. Activists argued that the denial of marriage rights to same-sex couples violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which guarantees equal treatment under the law. This legal argument mirrored the strategies used by civil rights activists to challenge racial segregation and discrimination, drawing on the same constitutional principles.

The 1970s were a time of significant change in both the legal and cultural landscapes of marriage. The introduction of no-fault divorce laws, beginning with California in 1970, made it easier for couples to divorce, leading to a significant increase in the divorce rate. Pop culture reflected this shift, with television shows and films depicting divorce as a normal, albeit challenging, part of life. Movies like *Kramer vs. Kramer* and television shows like *Divorce* depicted the complexities of post-divorce life, challenging the notion of marriage as an unbreakable social contract.

LGBTQ+ representation in pop culture also began to emerge during this period, albeit slowly. Early representations were often fraught with stereotypes and controversy, but they marked the beginning of a broader cultural shift. The 1970s saw the first major LGBTQ+ characters in

mainstream media, such as in the movie *The Boys in the Band* and *The Bob Newhart Show* introduced an openly gay character in 1975. Adding to this, Harvey Milk became the first openly gay politician elected to office in 1975, just a few years after a clerk in Colorado began issuing marriage licenses for same-sex couples. Once the AIDS crisis emerged during the 1980s, LGBTQ issues became cemented in public discourse, setting the stage for future legal and social battles.

Late 20th to 21st Century: Marriage Equality, Legal Strategies, and the Influence of Rights-Based Liberalism

The late 20th and early 21st centuries saw the culmination of decades of advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights, with marriage equality becoming a central issue. The legal strategies employed by the LGBTQ+ community were heavily influenced by the civil rights movement and the broader framework of rights-based liberalism that had taken root in American society during the 1960s.

The Role of Pop Culture

The 1980s and 1990s were marked by growing visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals in pop culture, with television shows like *Ellen* and movies like *Philadelphia* bringing LGBTQ+ issues to mainstream audiences. Ellen DeGeneres's public coming out in 1997 was a significant cultural moment that helped to normalize LGBTQ+ identities in American society.

As pop culture increasingly embraced LGBTQ+ representation, the legal landscape began to shift. The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) of 1996 defined marriage as the union of one man and one woman, but was not enforceable. The tide began to turn in the early 2000s, with states like Massachusetts legalizing same-sex marriage in 2003. Pop culture continued to influence public opinion, with shows like *Will & Grace* and *Modern Family* portraying same-sex couples in positive, relatable ways, helping to shift public perceptions and build support for marriage equality.

The legal battles over same-sex marriage culminated in the Supreme Court's historic ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), which legalized same-sex marriage nationwide. This decision was a landmark moment in the history of marriage in the United States, reflecting the profound cultural changes that had been taking place over the previous decades.

Pop culture played a critical role in paving the way for this decision. The widespread visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals and couples in media helped to create a cultural environment where the idea of marriage equality became increasingly normalized. The portrayal of same-sex couples as ordinary, relatable people deserving of the same rights as heterosexual couples was instrumental in changing public attitudes and influencing the legal outcomes.

As the 21st century progressed, the increasing prevalence of divorce was mirrored in pop culture, which often depicted divorced individuals navigating their new lives with humor and resilience. Shows like *Divorce* and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* presented divorce not as a failure, but as an opportunity for reinvention and personal growth. These portrayals reflected and reinforced the evolving social norms around marriage, where the institution was increasingly seen as one option among many for organizing personal relationships and family life.

Conclusion

The history of marriage in the United States is a rich and complex narrative, deeply intertwined with the nation's social, cultural, and legal developments. From its colonial roots as a property-based institution to its modern incarnation as a union based on love, equality, and companionship, marriage has undergone significant transformations. Pop culture has played a crucial role in these changes, particularly in shaping attitudes toward sexuality, gender roles, divorce, and LGBTQ+ rights. As the institution of marriage continues to evolve, the role of pop culture in shaping public perceptions and influencing legal and social outcomes will remain significant.

Part 2: Implications—Meeting Us and Them

After allowing the Bible, theological tradition, and the world to enter a conversation on their own terms, it is time for us to consider how reconciliation between the three might come about. What are the large-scale implications for what we are doing as Christians in the world? In this section we ask “So what?”

Chapter 13

A Summary of Mark Yarhouse's Three Lenses

Rev. Emily Hamilton

This essay offers a simple review of Mark Yarhouse's three "lenses" for understanding diverse gender identities.¹ The Standing Theology Committee has found these lenses particularly helpful as a descriptive tool for understanding how different perspectives and ideologies around gender identity, both within and beyond the Christian world, overlap and stand in tension with one another. The framework illuminates why conversations around gender identity can feel so significant, fraught, and why it can feel like holders of divergent perspectives are often talking past one another.

Before diving into the lenses, it will be helpful to review a definition of gender dysphoria. "Gender dysphoria" refers to the experience of distress associated with the incongruence that arises when one's psychological and emotional gender identity does not match one's biological, natal sex.² Not everyone who experiences gender incongruence meets the DSM standards for a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, but the term gender dysphoria and gender incongruence often get used interchangeably in non-clinical settings.³

The first lens Yarhouse describes is the *Integrity Lens*.⁴ This lens is, likely, the dominant lens of the majority of evangelical Christians across the world and across time. The integrity lens affirms that gender identity is part of an essential, ontological, sacred reality of who we are. There are certain inherent differences between how males and females ought to behave in alignment with their sexed bodies. To violate these categories of maleness and femaleness by confusing the distinctiveness of their cultural expressions, we

¹ Yarhouse is a professor at Wheaton College and clinical psychologist who specializes in conflicts tied to religious and gender identity, and he works with people who are navigating an often complex relationship between their sexual or gender identity and Christian faith. At Wheaton he runs the Sexual and Gender Identity Institute.

² Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 62.

³ Mark A. Yarhouse and Julia A. Sadusky, *Gender Identity and Faith: Clinical Postures, Tools, and Case Studies for Client-Centered Care* (Westmont: IVP, 2022), 26.

⁴ For an overview of the three lenses, see Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*.

violate the way that God wants us to live out our gender identity; cross-gender identification is a problem because it threatens the distinctiveness God created. This lens tends to place a great deal of weight on the doctrine of creation. Those who exclusively or primarily affirm this lens might view gender incongruence as a kind of morally culpable, chosen disobedience that ought to be corrected. Since gender incongruence is a problem, we rectify it by helping those who experience it to choose and live out a form of gender expression is *congruent* their biological sex. For people who grow up in evangelical communities and experience incongruence, this is often the lens that they first experience in their families or from religious leaders when they disclose their incongruence.

The second lens is the *Departure* Lens.⁵ Through this lens, gender incongruence is a result of living in a fallen world. Incongruence is a *departure* from God's good intentions and not the way it is supposed to be, but it is not necessarily a willfully chosen, disobedient behavior. We should respond to it more like an illness—not a *good* thing, but a thing to be *treated* rather than *corrected*. To struggle, then, with gender incongruence is not in and of itself wrong; however it is a situation within which people have a range of more and less virtuous choices responding to a range of ethical dimensions. This lens tends to place a great deal of weight on the reality of the fall and how we experience sin not only as moral failure and culpability but as an alien power that strangles our flourishing and from which we need deliverance. With the name “departure,” this lens reinforces and rests on some of the prior assumptions from the integrity framework, namely, that gender identity is a created good, and our bodies are good. There is still a concern over the lack of congruence, but it is a concern that majors on palliation rather than correction, easing the severity of pain without necessarily removing its cause. The departure framework wants us to be curious about how we help people experience less distress in their gender dysphoria and incongruence in the least invasive ways possible. There is some alignment between the integrity and departure lenses, but people who major on the departure framework may allow for more kinds of palliative interventions like cross-gender identification or

⁵ In *Understanding Gender Dysphoria* Yarhouse used the term “disability” to describe this lens. In *Gender Identity and Faith* he calls it “disability (or departure).” Due to the potential confusion that could occur in conflating gender incongruence with disability, I prefer the term “departure” and will use it here.

pronoun changes in ways that proponents of the integrity view may find problematic.

The third lens is the *Diversity* lens, which holds that gender incongruence is neither a sin to be corrected nor a condition to be palliated or lamented; rather, it is an expression of good diversity and the ways that people come in all kinds of different bodies, genders, and preferences. Incongruence is not a problem; *distress* around incongruence is the problem. Within the diversity lens, we ought to celebrate and clear pathways for people to express or their incongruence however they see fit. This lens tends to be concerned with identity and community and helping people who experience gender incongruence find their people and themselves. Increasingly, this is the lens that is depicted in our entertainment and media in Western culture. Yarhouse notes there are some stronger expressions of the diversity framework that argue any kind of a sex-gender binary is itself a form of authority that is inherently oppressive and needs to be completely dismantled. The diversity lens is likely the one that most evangelical Christians would be wary of if not completely opposed to because it does not seem to account for maleness and femaleness as created goods, and stronger forms seem to sever the connection between personhood and our bodies. Often, people who do hold the diversity framework likely view themselves as opposed to an integrity framework and potentially offended by the notion of the departure framework. For those who experience gender incongruence, they will likely experience some form of this lens when disclosing to a doctor or mental healthcare provider. So for the teenager experiencing gender dysphoria that may also be linked to depression or anxiety, their mental healthcare provider, operating with a diversity framework, might promote resolution of the depression and the dysphoria not through palliation, but through removing the supposed cause of the distress all together through medical transition and presenting as their preferred gender.

We need to consider not only these frameworks as we form our own perspectives and responses, but we need to understand the range of reactions that Christians experiencing gender dysphoria will face. They may encounter a hard integrity framework from their church leaders if they disclose. Then they may encounter a strong diversity framework in media and in healthcare. And yet, as Yarhouse's own research has found, many Christians dealing with gender dysphoria are needing something more robust than what either of those alone can do. Here, Yarhouse moves from description to more prescription.

He proposes that Christians responding to experiences of gender dysphoria ought to integrate some of the best of all three frameworks. Even if Christians can't affirm *everything* about the diversity framework, there's something we can learn about the emphasis on identity and community that the diversity framework speaks to in a way that the other three do not always adequately do. The diversity framework may not offer the most helpful answer, but we should listen to the questions it is attempting to answer: Who am I? Where and to whom do I belong if this is how I feel about myself? Also, Yarhouse is quite concerned that if we hold exclusively to an integrity framework, we run the risk of heaping so much shame and blame on people with gender dysphoria that we will necessarily drive them into the diversity framework and away from the Church, and as he says shame "will not provide any kind of meaningful structure for identity."⁶

This is where elements of the departure framework offer, for Yarhouse, a way of reframing gender dysphoria in light of cruciformity, a form of suffering that can become a context for greater Christlikeness. He writes,

It should not be assumed that greater Christlikeness is the same as having experiences of gender dysphoria abate. Rather, many people who know and love Christ have besetting conditions that have simply not resolved as a result of their belief in Christ as their Savior. Indeed, it may very well be that it is in the context of these enduring conditions that God brings about greater Christlikeness. . . . I imagine some readers will be thinking to themselves, I just want the person to choose the right path. . . . If you want a person to choose a path that seems more redemptive, you will want to be part of a redemptive community that facilitates that kind of decision making for every person who is a member. Recall, though, that redemption frequently takes the form of making meaning out of suffering.⁷

For Yarhouse, confronting the reality of gender dysphoria is a call for us all to embrace a great Christlikeness that involves a willingness to lament and endure through suffering rather than simply avoiding it, trusting that even our wounds will one day be transfigured as the wounds of Christ himself.

So, these three lenses (integrity, departure, and diversity) are a framework for understanding how people conceptualize gender incongruence both in and outside the Church. The three lenses help us make sense of our

⁶ Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, 54–55.

⁷ Yarhouse, 148, 154.

starting points when we approach these conversations, helping us see places of overlap, tension, and incompatibility. In particular, Yarhouse clarifies for us why Christian positions that emphasize integrity or departure may be impossible starting points for people who hold to a strong diversity framework and why, in addition to theological arguments, God's people need to be part of redemptive communities who help people articulate meaning and hope amidst suffering.

Chapter 14

The Shape of Stories Shapes the Church

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

What does the church exist to do? Why does *your* church exist? These simple but profound questions are vital for the church to consider. Each pastor and congregation should understand and be able to articulate a cogent answer. The issues around gender and sexuality will require that congregations unpack these questions for themselves, because the answer to these questions will determine how to fairly approach a strategy of hospitality, mission, and standards that serve to unite a people.

While we often think of mission, vision, value statements that each church makes for itself in terms of what the church does, the real "mission" of the Church is theological, and we call that mission "the gospel." Your individual church institution is a human organization that, ideally, does its very best to reveal the kingdom of God to the present evil age. And the way we do that is by telling and living *a story*.

Like any story, we can return to our secondary school literature classes and draw a "plot line" for it. In other words, we can create what I'll call a "narrative geometry" for the gospel. The shape of our gospel geometry determines the shape of our church expressions and how we meet the world. It also helps us unpack the shape of the narratives people tell about themselves and their interaction with the world. Narrative analysis is a powerful tool to help coach others, and to be critical of ourselves, so that we can ensure we are speaking the gospel to the world, and not speaking ourselves to the world.

Narrative Geometry: The Problem of Two Points

Every story requires at least two points, then and now, now and the future, us and them. That is because every story is a description in time of how different things are related. The simplest narratives found in myth and propaganda, are two pointed. And wherever there are two points, we can graph that on a Cartesian coordinate plane with X and Y axes. Typically, we represent the X axis as time, and the Y as some value we are comparing. With two points, the only shape we can formulate is a line: either ascending, descending, or flat. And this determines the shape of how we look at the world.

An ascending line we might call "progressive," not because it represents a politically liberal attitude, necessarily, but because it shows "progress." Over X time, the value of Y is increasing. In American economics we'd call this "bullish."

A descending line we might call "conservative," not because it fits exactly with right wing politics (though often does), but because it shows regress, decline, or an attitude that demands an inflection point. Economically we might call this "bearish."

A flat line represents no change, a stable situation. It's neither good nor bad. Time (X axis) has moved forward, but the value (Y axis) hasn't moved.

Each of these three plot lines matches kinds of myths and propaganda with which you might be familiar. Take political slogans as an example, Barack Obama's 2008 slogan "Hope," his 2012 slogan "Forward," and Bernie Sanders' 2020, "A Future to Believe in" signified a progressive narrative. They were forward-looking. Donald Trump's slogans "Make America Great Again" or "Take America Back" are conservative narratives in that they imply things have declined and that electing Trump would represent an inflection point. They are conservative because they look backward and trace a decline. Progressive narratives, by contrast, rarely look backward at all, and in that way communicate hope by an implicit notion that things can only get better. Obviously, few people campaign on a flat-line narrative of "keep everything the same" though there have been slogans like Abraham Lincoln's 1864 "Don't change horses midstream."¹ But even that slogan implies a sort of progressive narrative that things need to keep progressing and shouldn't be interrupted.

Slogans like these are vastly simplified and that purposefully. They often serve as a conclusion, a simple one-liner to portray the whole view of things. The famous concluding line of the Communist Manifesto, "Workingmen of all countries unite!" packs a lot of punch and it mobilized people for change. And while Communism has been seen as "progressive", the Communist Manifesto actually traces a conservative narrative. Things aren't what they used to be, workers have lost their freedoms and are being oppressed;

¹ Campaign slogans found at "List of United States Presidential Campaign Slogans," in *Wikipedia*, December 9, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List_of_United_States_presidential_campaign_slogans&oldid=1262096547.

they demand an inflection point. Communism narrated a peoples' struggle, recognized the feeling of a whole new category of people (proletariat), brought them to that inflection point, and then became a "gospel" because it offered the means to turn the downward trending graph upwards with practical actions of worker mobilization. It just so happened that Lenin, or Mao, or Castro presented themselves as messiahs of a movement that was built on having no masters, and so subverted the whole thing.

But two-point narratives can only trace a line. That's why they are almost always propaganda. *They mobilize because they simplify.* They reduce everyone and everything to an "us" and "them" and they ask everyone to line up and be counted. Traditional pagan myths take the same structure. Consider Hesiod's narrative of decline through various "ages" of Gold, Silver, Bronze, Heroic, and Iron, where in each age people live shorter and worse lives. A golden age story—perfection interrupted by some problem of chaos, needing to be fixed through civilization—is the typical form of almost all pagan creation myths. Why? They give marching orders to the people who tell the story to make civilization happen through the various things that people do, typically religio-political forms of order, often in support of a divine-king. There are yearly festivals (New Years) in which the cycle of golden age-chaos-new order is reproduced by acting it out, making each year itself a cycle of the narrative itself. (Yes, calendared liturgy is not a Christian invention). This cycle is easily seen as a V-shaped narrative, beginning and ending in order, with a downfall into chaos in the middle.

Some, like Buddhism, transform the flat-line narrative into the radius of a circle, transforming linear time into cyclical time symbolized by a wheel (one of Buddhism's main symbols), where time represents the cycles of karma needing to be escaped. In this we can see that religion also typically offers a simple narrative geometry, even if sometimes it is slightly more complex than political propaganda.

But people live within and die for these simplistic stories. The narrative imprints its image onto how they structure their outlook on the world and how they evaluate things, find their place, and more. The narrative offers a "topography" or a map of meaning to orient people to experience. It gives meaning to life, to death, to suffering, and provides a framework for joy.

What we usually find with narratives of meaning is that *the problem determines the solution*. More often than not, *the problem is often reproduced in*

the solution itself. What do I mean by that? If I live within a story of never having enough money, my problem will be focused on an obvious solution of "I need more money." But we might say that money was never the issue. Reducing wants might reduce our dependence on money. If I live by a narrative about "nobody likes me. I'm obviously different to everyone" then the solution is either to try to make people like me, or to reinforce the difference and live into a rebellious identity. Until we change the terms of the problem, the solution reinforces and justifies the narrative of the problem... And this should key us into why we might have trouble with classic evangelism strategies—we often make Jesus the inverted image of sin by narrating a story of sin.

Gospel Geometry

The gospels we tell have a narrative geometry like any other story. It is on us to align our retellings with the shape found in the Bible... which is clearly quite complicated. Strangely enough, the Bible doesn't have a single elevator pitch version of the gospel. That might clue us into the fact that none of its authors, or Jesus himself, thought that was how the gospel was best communicated. It was not a myth or propaganda, in fact, it was an account of the truth to counter the propaganda of Rome or Babylon.

Nevertheless, Christians have many versions of simplistic stories that offer easy explanations for why things are the way they are. "Sin" is often a catch-all term for any bad occurrence. Jesus himself encounters this simplistic narrative in the story of the man born blind where the main question "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" reveals the oversimplification that people were operating under.² Bad things only happen to bad people... that's the only way to make an unjust world make sense. It's the same problem the whole book of Job, and the book of Ecclesiastes are written to confront. Bad things happen to good people. Wisdom can't be as formulaic as Proverbs. And that's why the Bible has both Proverbs (written specifically for youth, cf. Prov. 1:8) and Job and Ecclesiastes which temper Proverbs with the seasoning of mature reflection on the limits of wisdom and human ability to make sense of the world.

² John 9:2.

So, we need a gospel geometry that does not oversimplify things into a basic pattern. Unfortunately, theology hasn't always helped in this manner. Typical systematic theological summaries of the gospel in four acts, for example: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration, trace a very clear V-shaped plot line that matches exactly that of most other religions. Things have gotten bad, but there's an inflection point, the "one simple thing you must do" that turns everything around, and now we're on an upwards, progressive trajectory leading to paradise. For the Christian, this has been utilized both in objective (Reformed) ways, "Don't worry, God is working all things together for good" and in subjective ways via the altar call and Baptist-style conversionism, or even in the middle Roman Catholic way, "Just participate in the sacraments and everything will work out." The V-shape plot line specifically works with two non-biblical terms: "Fall" and "Restoration." In doing so, it traces a narrative form learned from paganism. The Fall from perfection traces numerous Greek stories, like the fall of the Titans, the Prometheus myth, and the aforementioned decline narrative of Hesiod's ages. And because it derives a vision of "perfection" from its Greek ancestors, it aims to recover that state of perfection, to restore what was lost. And within this narrative structure, hope takes on concrete forms that invite us to imagine what things would look like if sin didn't exist. How would my marriage be perfect? How would the world look if justice were regained? It's a way for us to have our cake and eat it. All that has happened can be retained, only in a "fixed" or "repaired" or "healed" form. It's easy to poke fun at the "Big Rock Candy Mountains" or Islamic Paradise as forms of contextualized projection... are we so sure we aren't guilty of the same thing, even if in more subtle forms?

These V-shaped theological narratives dovetail perfectly with the myth of civilization. It is by human effort in cooperation with the divine that the "arc of the universe bends toward justice" or however we want to put this myth. Building, development, growth, the common good, done rightly will arrive at the kingdom of God. Heck, even scientific progress has been said to lead us to the "omega point" of union with God.³ In all of these cases, the narrative

³ This has taken numerous forms from "Christian Reconstructionism" and Christian Nationalism (German, American, English, or otherwise) to scientific progressivism under Pierre de Teilhard de Chardin or social justice forms under people like Harvey Cox (*The Secular City*, originally 1965). While these figures might politically be very different, they all

structure is equally simple, either things have always been progressing from creation through human cooperation, or things have gotten bad but are now or will get better with God's help. God is going to *fix* everything and *make it right*.

But, if we read the Bible with attuned ears, we find precious little of this progressive confidence. There is certainly *hope* and assurance that God will be king and enact his will on earth as in heaven, but there is also an ongoing sense that "we do not yet see all things submitted to him."⁴ God's will is not done on earth as in heaven, hence the point of praying the Lord's Prayer as a real petition.

This is the point of so many parts of the Bible, it's just not that simple, and we aren't in a V-shaped narrative. Rather, we're tracing a history with ups and downs, with hopes and disappointments. And in all that, what we're really finding is that *the gospel isn't about realizing a value or outcome, it's about forming a people*.

The "kingdom of God" is not a place or state of being. It is the relationship between a king and his subjects. Justice isn't a state of being, it's the combination of concrete behaviors and relationships between real people. In other words, justice is made up of concrete just acts between real people. And this means that the gospel isn't simply about what God did one time, once for all, to finally solve everything in one fell swoop. It's about how God has been faithful from generation to generation to bring his people to maturity, to the full stature of the measure of Christ, often by wrestling with him and asking the hard questions found throughout the Psalms. In other words, the gospel is about ongoing relationships that indeed are trending in a progressive direction... but that "progress" is into personal maturity formed in the community of God's people, the body of Christ.

The gospel geometry, then, often takes on a motion of calling, exodus, formation, and mission as it does throughout Scripture. Even the "hope of glory" is regularly put in terms of *responsibility* in both Jesus and Paul.⁵ That is, the kingdom of God in the resurrection is the rest of God's shared

present progressive narratives in that Christianity is utilized for partnership with other forces trending upwards.

⁴ Hebrews 2:8... Translations differ here on to whom things are being subjected "man" or Jesus. The Greek is ambiguous.

⁵ As in the Parable of the Talents and Paul's teaching on judgment of the world in 1 Cor 6.

sovereignty for people who have become mature enough to bear the responsibility.

Yarhouse's Three Lenses and Gospel Geometry

This conversation about narrative analysis returns us to our conversation about gender and sexuality as we consider how Mark Yarhouse's "three lenses" covered in the previous chapter map into geometric forms that often use sin as the driving focus of the narrative and make a Jesus and a church in the image of sin, rather than vice-versa.

Integrity Lens

The "integrity lens" maps onto a traditional forensic or penal substitutionary atonement (PSA) gospel. Here the focus is on the problem of lawbreaking and the solution of Jesus as the one who placates the wrath of an angry God by his self-sacrifice. While this theology was developed from Anselm in the Middle Ages,⁶ and has been challenged from the logic of actual OT sacrificial codes,⁷ it nevertheless remains the standard and often baseline option for Evangelicals who assume it as a settled opinion. What we can observe in it, however, is that by framing the story of Jesus in terms of sin-as-lawbreaking (something Jesus does not himself do), we must frame Jesus as the solution to lawbreaking. This means that, while we might preach "grace" until we're blue in the face, *the logic of our narrative is not grace, but law to which grace is the exception*. Put another way, the major geometry of our narrative is shaped by law, not by grace. And that means that if the world has heard anything, it has heard the dominant tone. Christianity, particularly Evangelicalism, has received the reputation for judgmentalism, legalism, and a laser-focus on a retributive afterlife.

PSA, however, demands the following beliefs for its logic to make sense:

1. The right of capital punishment for any crime, however minor

⁶ Anselm's own presentation in *Cur Deus Homo?* is not about lawbreaking in particular, but in the creation of a debt of honor for not showing proper fealty/obedience to the king in one's will. Jesus satisfies the debt of honor given the premise that it is unbecoming of God to cancel a debt of sin without payment. What Anselm makes of Paul's clear statement of this counterpoint in Col 2:14 is perhaps unknown.

⁷ Cf. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, 2024.

2. Retribution is the proper form of justice (as opposed to restoration or correction)
3. Transferable legal guilt and legal merit
4. Scapegoat mechanism where the innocent die for the guilty to satisfy an angry deity.⁸

Notably, none of these four beliefs are acceptable to most modern developed nations. Jesus himself denies the goodness of retribution.⁹ Jesus clearly teaches that God does indeed forgive without compensation.¹⁰ And the prophets question the notion of inherited or transferred guilt.¹¹ After all, if one receives compensation for forgiveness, it is not forgiveness or release, but repayment, which are vastly different things as anyone with student debt will confirm.

But if the modern world cannot accept the logic of PSA, and if the modern world generally hears the major dominant tone of "law" rather than the minor tone of "grace," if they are left with a vision of Christianity as a grand reward vs. punishment system, small wonder God is reduced to Santa Claus and rejected as a method to scare children into behaving well or moral reform.

The integrity lens typically follows a "conservative" narrative structure, and it also maps fairly well onto conservative politics for the same reason, they focus on unmet expectations that demand transformation or an inflection point. I couldn't prove it, but it seems plausible that the shape of PSA

⁸ The scapegoat mechanism has been fairly well shown to not be present in the OT. Leviticus 16, from which the word occurs, represents a mistranslation or interpretation of a goat for Azazel, likely a goat-demon. During Yom Kippur, there are two goats, one that is slaughtered that does not bear sin, and one that bears the sins of the people that is sent to the wilderness to Azazel. Leviticus 17 explicitly demands that goat demons receive no sacrifice and it is likely that sin is being returned to its source, delivered by the goat. Scapegoating is more prevalent in Greek myth and history.

⁹ Mt 5:38-45.

¹⁰ The 70x7 (or 77) teaching of Mt 18:21-22 and Lk 17:4 only makes sense if Jesus is demanding something God himself does. He cannot be demanding that people forgive in ways God himself is unwilling to.

¹¹ Cf. Jer 31:29-30; Ezek 18. The Jeremiah passage is a preamble to the giving of the famous New Covenant in which sins are remembered no more, and the law is written on hearts.

predisposes people to accept political propaganda that focuses also on lawbreaking and social decline into lawlessness.¹²

The shape of the integrity lens church thus also ends up subtly requiring that people behave before they belong, or at least seem to behave. And that means those who are openly LGBT are excluded from the outset, generally without regard to the intent of the church. Again, the challenge is that, while we think we're preaching grace, grace has already been defined as an exception to law, which is the truly dominant note, and a note of judgment that sounds first.

Churches that preach the integrity lens typically will drift rightward and will find it very difficult to reach outsiders, and often find that excluding insiders, even children of the church becomes the necessary logical outcome when they "come out" identifying as LGBT. This leads to feelings of betrayal and a general polarization that pushes those who do not find that they feel their identity conforms to the church norms into the arms of often polar opposite kinds of communities. That would be those who preach a progressive message whose dominant note is one of inclusion and acceptance, *not grace*. So, ironically, it is that many progressive communities bear an inverted legalist narrative that equally focuses on conformity and have no grace for those they deem bigots.

Disability Lens

The disability lens maps neatly onto gospel presentations which also are framed almost entirely by "sin" but now sin is defined broadly as "brokenness." A brokenness hamartiology demands a particular kind of solution. Broken things need to be "fixed." And if they are biological things they need "healing." This brokenness-healing narrative structure is incredibly popular even outside of Christianity. The Jewish theme of *tikkun olam* is roughly the same. And so also is the whole field of psychology... perhaps finding within psychology and psychotherapy as founded by Sigmund Freud, a secularized form of Judaism, just as there was a secularized Jewish

¹² Some scholars have traced similar connections between forms of European justice and versions of the gospel, e.g. Timothy Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence, and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

apocalypticism in Karl Marx. What is broken? For Marx it was a global power structure. For Freud, the human psyche.

We might broadly call this the *therapeutic gospel*. Of course, Jesus does heal people and Christian history is full of relics, shrines, pilgrimages, and saints who purportedly perform miracles of healing (a phenomenon not unique to Christianity). Jesus wasn't the only healer in his day, and there were whole cults devoted to healing gods like Asclepius from which our modern medical profession still derives its symbol of a serpent coiled on a staff. But ancient and medieval healing differs from the modern therapeutic gospel in that moderns universalize or democratize brokenness. Brokenness extends everywhere to everything. In the Reformed tradition this has more recently, especially among Neo-Calvinists who follow a Kuyperian tradition, taken over the word "redemption" and "redeem." Biblically speaking, redemption is the buying back of an alienated person or property. But to modern Christian parlance, "redemption" often substitutes for "fixing what is broken." These are entirely different meanings, solving two entirely different problems.

The therapeutic gospel is also seen in the popularization of Spiritual Formation literature and practices. "Healing" in terms of psychology typically means "integration" into behavioral norms. Most psychological issues are only "disabilities" when they interfere with "normal" life. The handbook on psychological pathologies is the DSM, *Diagnostic **Statistical** Manual of Mental Disorders*. That is, it is a field that entirely defines pathology through statistical analysis of social norms. When researching various psychological diagnoses, pay attention to the fact that psychological issues relate to the severity of *social exclusion*. By contrast, physical pathologies are diagnosed by symptoms of biological functioning and treated with triage based on risk of death or dismemberment.

The therapy represented in Spirituality is integrative and moves toward social normalization. And this, in turn, plays strongly into conversations about social norms, power structures (who gets to decide what's normal?) and post-Christendom. After all, it was easy during the 20th century when Christian moral norms were broadly equivalent with Western moral norms to equate psychological health with spiritual health. Religious beliefs or spirituality can themselves become symptoms of disintegration, loss of touch with social norms of "reality" and thus, depending on one's commitment level, a kind of social disability.

Put another way, homosexuality was previously considered a mental health issue in need of therapy. Now it is not. The script can be flipped, which was already being perceived in 90s popular Christianity with, e.g. DC Talk's song *Jesus Freak* which itself bears the exact same "coming out" narrative structure of an LGBT person:

What will people think when they hear that I'm a Jesus freak?

What will people do when they find out it's true?

I don't really care if they label me a Jesus freak

There ain't no despising the truth.

One could even call that a "pride anthem" of evangelical identity. It, like the LGBT movement, aims to normalize something that might otherwise be deemed abnormal or pathological.

So, what does it mean to adopt a therapeutic "brokenness" gospel in terms of church structure and strategy? It might mean intense discipleship with individuals who bear strong symptoms of disintegration with Christian norms, or "walking with" people who are going through challenges. More broadly it means a church structure focused on helping people feel welcome, comfortable, and hosted well. Songs and sermons are typically aimed at eliciting certain feelings and experiences, typically positive. Preaching can take a therapeutic form in which solutions come in the form of self-help steps to a better life. Most crassly this is found in prosperity gospel preaching. More subtly and to middle-class sentiments, takes on the language of "flourishing" or "thriving." Logos and branding might see a fair degree of overlap with other therapeutic professions. The midwife we had for the birth of our two children used tree-based logos and imagery that are sometimes found in many churches.

But when it comes to the LGBT community, the problem becomes evident. If we describe these as symptoms of "sexual brokenness" or "gender brokenness" church becomes a form of conversion therapy, and a potential nightmare of "gaslighting" where worldly cultural norms are denied as norms and LGBT people are told that they are the problem that needs to be "fixed."

Where LGBT people might be excluded from the integrity church, they might feel that a therapeutic church is a bait-and-switch, or potentially triggering of previous traumas. In spite of attempts to be more welcoming, the therapeutic church is actually far less welcoming due to an attempt to remove agency from the person. Therapeutic gospels are *disempowering*. If someone is "broken" then they are not responsible. And if not responsible, they can only

be a *patient* who is worked upon by others to heal or fix them. Again, imagine if the script is flipped, and as an evangelical to go into an LGBT affirming space and be told that you are broken because you manifest bigotry, and that you need to submit to therapy to be healed of your problems, and accept and even celebrate the normalcy of LGBT lifestyles and question the heteronormativity and cisnormativity of your previous life. It's a form of brainwashing in either case.

The challenge for those who preach brokenness is not only that it's just not biblical, it's also that it risks either conforming to the patterns of the world (since mental health is integration into social norms) or living in an enclave of maladjusted people (to the world) who not only aren't pursuing a common good (can't!), but are actively gaslighting entire segments of the population.

Diversity Lens

Diversity perspectives and a diversity gospel are rapidly making inroads in professional theology, if not yet in the wider church. While this is highly prevalent in progressive or mainline churches that actively seek to enforce LGBT affirmation and affirmative action, it is becoming more prevalent among other groups that previously also considered "disabled." There is a whole growing field of disability theology that focuses on a variety of kinds of disabilities as kinds of legitimate diversity. For example, contentions have arisen in places like the deaf community and among people who now identify as neurodiverse or neurodivergent (or autism spectrum disorder). Are such people *disabled* or is that an *ableist* perspective that excludes people because they are a minority? How severe does someone's autism have to be to be considered disabled? How should employers, churches, or other social spaces accommodate for these differences?

More widespread and less obviously progressive is the Evangelical fixation on personality quizzes, using language of "wiring" or Meyers-Briggs or the Enneagram, or even last-name hidden meanings as ways of "finding oneself" and becoming liberated by uncovering the truth about one's true identity.

Many people find great *liberation* in these narratives, because they can connect with other people who have similar stories of exclusion and being misunderstood or treated in patronizing ways. Within these communities and

the identity they offer, they "give a name" to a person who previously perhaps felt they did not have a proper name of respect in their communities. While ethnic groups certainly pioneered the fight to be proud of themselves and their cultures, it is not surprising that a similar political movement is happening with other kinds of diversities.

Right or wrong, the power of a liberation gospel to *empower* people is undeniable. And so it is that the diversity lens maps very well onto a liberation theology or gospel. Sin is in the structures of oppression imposed on us by the outside world. The solution to oppression is turning the tables, or at least seeking freedom in equal recognition.

So, we find in this gospel the importance of identity. Identity, a name, is vital, because it "explains so much" about a person's life experience. They feel like the identity offered by a wider group fits them well and so they adopt their narrative as their own. It's a form of political coalition, strength in numbers.

There have been many versions of this gospel told by theologians beyond the early Marxist liberation theologians. This is where we have identity-group theologies corresponding to race, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, (dis)ability, and more. America itself bears this same narrative structure in its national mythos of finding or forging a new identity in liberation from colonial oppression, as do most nations in the Western and Southern hemispheres who all have forged new identities based on government by "the people." Whether in power or out of power, pride in identity group re-creates a nativist gospel and the attendant danger of making a god in the image of our social group, a phenomenon called "projection" that was observed as early as Xenophanes of Colophon (ca 570-478 BC).

In most cases, these are progressive narratives that focus on how a people are advancing to a destiny shaped by them and for them, in a story tailor made to them. And so, it all comes down to power politics and attempts to manage diverse people with diverse stories and values.

A church that adopts a liberation or diversity model will demonstrate this by joining coalitions for political purposes, either rightist or leftist. But it will be a church that focuses on social and political action for the advancement of a diverse identity. After all, Jesus paid special attention to the weak, the outcast, the poor, women, widows, orphans, etc. While it's not wrong to emphasize these facts, it is a misrepresentation of the gospel to count the

liberation of people groups or identity groups as a sufficient condition to describe the kingdom of God. The exodus wasn't about simply liberating a people, it was about freeing a people to be formed into a missional people.

And to return to gender and sexuality, we can see why progressive churches not only want to affirm LGBT identity but want to militantly advance the cause of LGBT identity as *allies* in a political contest for dominance or pecking order within a larger political system. Within this mode of operation, it's not just a misrepresentation of the gospel, but a complete abandonment of being ambassadors that bring people to primary loyalty to Jesus. But the same goes for conservatives who seek value-based coalitions. To join forces with Mormons, for example, on a certain form of legislation does nothing in itself to advance the kingdom of God or represent Jesus to the world, given that such cooperation must come at the cost of relegating orthodoxy to political capital. The desire of the diversity or identity-based church is to be "inclusive" because in doing so, their identity is furthered in influence. The more allies, the more insiders, the larger the coalition, and the more legitimate the identity. The desire is to become a welcoming, safe-space in which everyone can find freedom in becoming themselves by helping people find themselves. Again, whether that be through the Enneagram, or through sexual diversity, the logical moves or narrative geometry are largely the same. The problem: ignorance of the self often imposed by an ignorant world bent on subjugating diverse people. The solution: finding oneself and educating the world where possible, and where not possible, resisting those who are bigots.

A Gospel Shaped Church

The challenge of all three of Yarhouse's lenses is that, as he himself acknowledges, none of them individually represent the right answer or the one best way. At the same time, we can see that those churches who hold to an integrity model and a PSA gospel are engaged in a *necessary culture war* as irreconcilable enemies with those who hold a diversity narrative. Sin as disobedience to the objective law of God makes those who identify as LGBT-as-legitimate-diversity as disagreeing about the most fundamental aspect of a person's narrative. This makes people who have competing narratives into enemies. This helps explain why church traditions have lined up on different

sides that end in bitter division and rivalry. They have different formative narratives.

So, how do we live by a *gospel of reconciliation*? How do we "love our enemies?"¹³ What gospel should we present and how would that shape our church and our ability to offer good news to the world that doesn't compromise on sin? I've written in other chapters in this book a narrative geometry that is biblical and pedagogical. The main thing is to properly identify the problem of sin in the Bible, which none of the three above gospel versions do, because only by rightly identifying the problem will we narrate the solution Jesus himself offered.

And here's where the implications get quite challenging. The church as we know it is incapable of resolving the culture war. This problem cannot be solved with the institutions we currently have. We must reimagine the church itself as an outflowing of the narrative geometry of the Bible. And with that comes a reimagining of what church is for, what it does, who leads it, etc. The church can only reveal the kingdom of God if the kingdom of God is its gospel. And the kingdom of God can only be a legitimately lived-out gospel if the church can express itself as a primary community within which people live and move and have their being *as the body of Christ*.

¹³ Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27, 6:35.

Chapter 15

Redefining Gender Theologically: Church as Context for Gender

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr¹

What is gender, how is it different to sex, and what can we say constructively about it as Christians? ECO is in a unique theological situation that presents unique challenges and opportunities when it comes to discussions of gender identity. ECO is committed to the value-equality of male and female and committed to rejecting defined roles for them, especially in the church. But ECO is also committed to retaining an inseparable association between biological sex and gender. And yet, this position is increasingly difficult to hold culturally, given that for many it has been a temporary stop on the way toward the dissolution of gender as a meaningful concept.

How do we maintain a view of value equivalence and anti-hierarchism without confusing the genders, or rendering them meaningless by taking away unique functions for them? After all, whatever gender is, most people would agree that it is primarily about *social roles and representations* that play into conversations about economics in the classic sense of the term (household management), which often means labor specialization.² And if we deny labor specialization in specific spheres outside of reproductive function, are we destined to slide into a more progressive gender fluid or even a post-gender perspective?

This chapter investigates these questions by offering a theology of gender that is rooted in an ecclesial reality of people going onto maturity in Christ. I will be concluding that most common perspectives misconstrue gender entirely by trying to turn it into a kind of *essence* rather than a

¹ Special thanks to Rev Emily Hamilton for her early contributions and our conversations around this subject.

² *Oikonomia* is a Greek word for household-rule or law that gives us economy, economics, and economist. It is only in the past few centuries that this term has been separated into a notion of distribution of various forms of capital in a market. This is not inconsequential for the transformation of gender. Once production and consumption no longer occur primarily within and for a household or family, but in a market, gender becomes increasingly more market-driven rather than family-driven.

description of relationships and social expectations that arise for sexed individuals at various life stages. This will show that Christians should have a profoundly hopeful gospel about gender reconciliation in Scripture that can inform our practices.

Defining Gender

First off, what is gender and how does it differ from sex? Broadly speaking, most authors conceive of gender as an *essence*, or as a feature of being, or *ontology*. This is certainly how gender is perceived both legally and popularly when it is referred to as an “identity.” An identity is something that is relatively fixed and defined in isolation from the influence of others. To put it another way, society today commonly thinks of gender as part of your authentic self, who you are when you are by yourself. We’re going to see that this is problematic.

Within this world of essences, the main division between scholars comes down to a spectrum between “biological determinism” on the one hand and “social constructivism” on the other. This spectrum holds that gender is either determined by one’s biology—by hormones, by chromosomes, by body type—or by the pressures of society to make meaning out of those biological facts in conversation with countless other social factors. Most authors major on one side or the other, but few go to the extremes of saying it is only biology or only society.

In defining gender as an essence we could use a few different criteria. The first and most historically viable is defining gender as the social norms or goods³ that surround sexual attraction, reproduction, appearance, behavioral expectations, and a division of labor into defined roles based on biological sex (and age). There are thus things that unify many cultures throughout history, since most of these roles are related to biological functioning. However, there are also significant cultural differences among different people groups that make a blanket definition of men and women based on specific, say *economic* roles impossible. Nor can we make blanket statements of male dominance across all people groups to conclude that men have always had authority over women. The anthropological evidence just does not support such a claim.

³ The difference between a norm and a good depends on one’s political philosophy... a theme we’ll see develop throughout this chapter.

So, it has been through studying of various cultures across space and time that rigid gender roles rooted in biology have rightly been criticized. There are simply more factors that play into gender identity and roles than biology, even if that is one of the most, or the most important contributing factors historically.

Yet, because most gender scholarship is fixated on debating about essences and questions about “what does it mean to be a man (or woman, or something else)?” they typically miss that biology and society are two factors among many others, and that both views represent a vast oversimplification that always happens with discussions about ontology.

Sidebar: The Problem of Essences

Let’s take a brief detour into the realm of philosophy to discuss why defining gender as an essence is always a simplification. The field of ontology (the study of being) is part of the philosophical field of metaphysics (what lies beyond physics). And that is because ontology asks a question that biology or physics cannot answer... “what is a tree?” or “what is a table?” For people who natively lived in and around forests, who derived their livelihood from the forest, the functional use of a concept of a generic tree was minimal. Each kind of tree had its own value for different things. And for many, each individual tree might have its own meaning. After all, every tree has its own story. Each one is unique and has unique relationships with the other plants and animals that live around it. A simplified notion of “tree” then is only useful to people who don’t know trees, or who see trees mostly as resources which can be capitalized by their exploitation. In other words, there is no such thing as “tree” only real individual trees. The concept of “tree” exists in the human mind and social consciousness based on how we exploit various trees for different purposes (even moral ones in terms of conservation). A Christmas tree, for example, is a social construct. Its meaning comes only from human convention about what people do with cut trees put into homes and decorated, and even this has a history connected with Germanic peoples and their ancient traditions around midwinter celebrations.

All that to say, if we tried to say, “what does it mean to be a tree?” it would be pretty obvious pretty quickly that that’s a meaningless question. A pine tree? A palm tree? A Christmas tree? A bonsai? The meaning of the tree is

determined by the person giving it meaning. If the trees could talk, they would tell their own stories.⁴ Put another way, the “being” of a tree is both inaccessible and meaningless in itself, which means there might as well not be an essence called “treeness.” Instead, it is more useful to study what humans do with trees. And when we tell the story, we do so typically in judgmental or evaluative ways. That is, we rate things as better or worse based on categories of our own shared judgment. A good Christmas tree is straight, cone-shaped, has no large gaps, keeps its needles for a good month or two, and fits right within the house it is destined for. We are telling a story in which we become the judges or evaluators of potential Christmas trees on a lot, and within that evaluation comes into question the size of our own house or room, and other factors like budget. In choosing a Christmas tree, we engage in a complex process of evaluation that involves many, often unrecognized, values that exist in our own heads, in the tree itself, in social expectations, in family expectations, and in profit expectations of the salesperson.

The same goes for humans ourselves. The desire to answer the question, “what does it mean to be human” is understandable, but also rather meaningless and impossible to answer. To answer the question is to reduce the complexities of human interaction within a whole community of creation toward the simplest definition we could find. We then reuse that definition to judge others, evaluating how they measure up to our definition. So, if we talk about human rationality, at once we have questions about artificial intelligence and mental disabilities. Is AI “more human” than a person with severe brain damage? Some would give a resounding “yes” and advocate for euthanasia for the one and research funding toward the other.

The problem is, we find that morality or justice is always-already implicated in the quest to find an essence. Whatever definition we come up with will give us a criterion of evaluation that, more often than not, lifts us up and tears others down, just as we do with all the other non-human species.

Ontological definitions are simplifications. In order to be maximally applicable, we have to create a definition that gives us a certain bell curve. We might try to create a peaky, compressed middle bell curve to push people toward excellence... often at the cost of violence to others. That’s typically the “conservative” mode of reasoning. Or we might try to create a maximally

⁴ Hence Tolkien imagines the trees having personalities and their own language in *The Lord of the Rings*.

inclusive, flattened bell curve in which the least number of people are left out. This creates the problem of the lowest common denominator for things like public services and education, effectively stunting those who could excel by pushing resources toward those who need more support to achieve less. As we will see shortly, this is exactly the dichotomy that reproduces culture war in most fields and is doing so in gender debates.

Simplifications are like definitional levers. They allow a small amount of weight to move great and heavy things, like whole societies. But they always demand the question of “who gave you the right to define others and determine their destiny based on conversations they weren’t included in?”

Breakdown of Essence-Based Gender

The demand for an essentialized gender that often leads into strict binary forms of male-female is symptomatic of rapid and dramatic social change. As I will argue shortly, gender is not a single essence, but the storied interaction of men and women navigating through life in a particular and highly complex context. But the demand for gender essentialism, or its rejection in “gender skepticism” or gender nihilism as I will call it, exists because the changes that are happening to our contexts have radically shifted the way people tell the stories of meaning and interaction between men and women.

Once we take away two key things, gender is able to drift from its largely biological basis: economic productivity, and the primacy of reproduction. The dual technological inventions of reliable contraception and widespread mechanization have made biological difference less vital to a person’s role in society. The decline of these determining factors also play into how children are perceived by their parents. Children, at least among the middle and upper classes, are largely chosen to fit within career plans, and are economically unproductive. Because the return on investment of parenthood is no longer social security in old age, or pride in a large clan, the motivating factors of life and narrative have moved more toward social roles in corporate and careerist terms, since it is through businesses (not family business) that the means of life, social security, and retirement generally come (if it does). This reorientation of labor toward businesses or “fictive persons”⁵ makes biological

⁵ This is a legal definition of a corporation going back to the early medieval period.

sexual difference a question of how it might be utilized to fulfill a narrative of ascent or social progress. Children might “ruin a woman’s career,” as could marriage at the wrong time or to the wrong person. Corporations live and move and have their being by transforming people into resources or capital, and helping people narrate their life stories through primarily careerist terms based on desired outcomes and progress toward these. Put another way, the whole idea of leadership and goal-oriented living is not natural, it is artificial, and it plays a massive role in the move toward gender nihilism by defining the highest goods of a person’s life story, “success,” in terms that often have nothing to do with reproduction and propagation of a lineage.

Thus, the definition of gender has shifted more toward how it functions in the stories we tell about ourselves today as opposed to stories told in the ancient world, like that of Hannah and Peninnah,⁶ or Rachel and Leah,⁷ or in Greek myth, the story of Leto and Niobe.⁸ In all of these stories the bearing of many children, especially sons, is the mark of success in a woman’s life, and having no or few children is cause for insult. These are the kinds of things that show us in part what gender *meant* to a very different world. They do not show us what gender *means* today, only how much gender itself has been transformed in the life-narrative of individuals.

So, if men and women are no longer defined by their prolific clans, and physical strength is useful only really for sport, which is largely superficial, then gender has little to tie it to reproduction or economic production. *Functionally*, gender is losing its social meaning. If gender has no functional meaning determined by biology, it becomes largely about *presentation* or *performance*. Thus, we think of gender mostly in terms of color choice, clothing style, body hair management, and other aesthetic criteria. Gender is a mask we wear, and many are now unsure as to why they should conform to stereotypes that have no real meaning in their lives. Hence, we have a reaction against gender stereotypes through notions like gender fluidity. One can present oneself physically and verbally as something unrelated to their biology.

Thus, it is understandable why many scholars and theologians would observe that gender is mostly a social construct and that biology isn’t that

⁶ See 1 Sam 1:6.

⁷ See especially the rationale for the naming of Leah’s sons as in Gen 30:16-20.

⁸ Niobe was a mortal woman who boasted that she had more children than Leto, a goddess mother of Apollo and Artemis. Apollo and Artemis kill all Niobe’s children for her insult.

determinative anymore... which leads some of the more radical social constructivists to question whether biology ever was determinative or social pressure and conformity just made it seem to be that way.

But it may not be quite so simple. There are those who argue for “brain-sex theory” in which human brains work differently based on their chromosomal makeup, or even prenatal neuroendocrinology (sex hormones in fetuses impacting brain development)⁹. So, there are those who argue for a “neuroqueer” theory or use the seemingly higher correlation of autism spectrum disorder and gender nonconformism to argue that the intersection of these issues has a causal origin in brain make-up.¹⁰ The scientific community is divided about neurological diversity in general, let alone labelling neurodiversity with gendered or sexed terms based on hormonal developments. So, the science is still out and is perhaps not that helpful in defining *gender*. And really the conversation should reveal that the category of gender is breaking down as various people and camps try to push various sources of defining characteristics into it. Perhaps gender is irreducibly complex, and most parties are guilty in oversimplification as it is essentialized.

As Felipe do Vale argues, this oversimplification into two sides who reduce either the influence of society or biology ends up fostering a culture war rather than a constructive conversation.¹¹

At the heart of the controversies around gender is not science, religion, or morality, but politics. The ultimate question is about where identity comes from and who has the right to define or impose it. Urbanization and globalization, I might suggest, has more to do with this conversation than any other factors. It is by trying to constitute traditionally “liberal” societies in which the state exists to facilitate the freedoms of individuals that questions of “normativity” have arisen. Who has the right to define what is normal and why should anyone have the right to impose normality or normalization on others? Psychology, for example, is all about trying to make people more neurotypical by using therapy to conform people to a functional middle. In a sense, its job is to squish a bell curve, making it taller rather than wider, and move people to the center. Much of the literature around Spiritual Formation and

⁹ Simon Baron-Cohen (Cambridge) is the pioneer and proponent of this view.

¹⁰ See work by Nick Walker, Athena Lynn Michaels-Dillon, and M. Remi Yergeau.

¹¹ Do Vale, *Gender As Love*, 74.

disciplines takes a similar approach in working to use techniques to modify individuals toward normative types and beneficial patterns.

Radical liberalism would hold that all of this is a form of violence, that individual sovereignty is violated when someone tries to impose gender or sexual norms on others. Political conservatism (in the classic sense) typically emphasizes that one group or identity is better than others and aims to conform everyone to that norm as we see for example in Islamic nations or in China. Which is better, to have everyone be themselves, or to remake everyone in the image of perfection or the ideal? And if everyone is going to be themselves, shouldn't we simply abolish gender as a concept, especially if social roles are no longer confined to people's specific biological sex? The progressive trend is toward the abolition of gender, or its explosion into limitless diversity. The conservative trend is toward increasing stereotyping of gender binaries of "real men" and "real women." If marketing is anything to judge by, the conservative narrative is still fairly dominant.

Alternatives?

Thus, the church is caught in a volatile mix of political theory. Church traditions typically drift toward either political option. Progressives will emphasize the radical freedom of individuals to define themselves. Conservatives will be drawn to normative narratives that might also include elements of ethnocentrism or nationalism. Within the Christian world, we thus have a chasm opening up, not between Complementarians and Egalitarians, but between Complementarians/Patriarchists and LGBT affirming denominations. Evangelical Egalitarianism is a fraught position to maintain in this no-*person's*-land.

What are the alternatives and how could ECO help chart a third way? Thankfully theological scholarship is starting to address this question. Here are a few options that have been proposed recently. Felliipe do Vale's *Gender as Love* is an excellent book that surveys the rather few alternatives. He wrestles with theologian Sarah Coakley definition of gender as desire. Partly because of her mystical or ascetic approach to theology, which I would describe in my chapter on eros and agape to be the pinnacle of eros, she ends up with gender being connected in a relationship of desire that leads toward fusion and finding the self in other. Coakley ends up as something of a gender nihilist.

Do Vale finds Coakley insufficient because he argues that gender should be defined as love, not as desire. He offers four assertions, which we'll briefly respond to below:

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

Notably these assertions begin with a claim to essentialism. Do Vale thinks that gender is still a kind of essence, though it is rather unknowable due to its complexity and the effects of sin on our ability to know anything that well. But because do Vale sees gender as an essence, it falls for him within a kind of brokenness narrative, with a solution in some kind of fixing of gender in the eschaton.¹²

So, while I broadly agree with where do Vale arrives in his conclusions, that gender is not abolished in new creation and that it is given value by Christ, I think do Vale errs in continuing a conversation about essences. God is not in the business of redeeming categories or types, but creatures. Jesus didn't die for men and women, he died for named individuals.¹³

A Proposal: Gender as Characteristic

One large problem is as we've already seen, any form of essentialism leads people to talk about inherent value, as though male and female could

¹² See chapter 14 for reasons why I think this is problematic.

¹³ Thus, I don't see Athanasius' famous notion that what Christ didn't assume in his nature is not redeemed to be that convincing. The incarnation itself isn't the grounds of human salvation, nor is the resurrection. It's not because Jesus shared human DNA that human DNA is redeemable. Your DNA is redeemable from death because Jesus is king over death. The metaphysics here is unnecessary and unhelpful. The individuality of Jesus is more helpful, not his universality.

convey value in themselves. But inherent value doesn't exist, because value is a relationship of evaluation. Gender justice cannot be achieved without falling back into some dichotomous position of society over individual or vice-versa, because it's always a political question of *who's the judge?* The answer is, of course Jesus Christ, in whom there is no condemnation for those who are in him. That means there is no value in being male or female. There is only value as we are given value by Jesus (who died for us).

In contrast to essences, we have characteristics. While these might seem synonymous, they are actually almost antonyms. A characteristic is unique to a character in a story, and bears significantly on the development of the story, and yet is also modified by the story and the characters in the story. I propose that gender is a relational characteristic, rooted in biological sex, dialectically developing within an irreducibly complex life-story, filled with innumerable macro and micro influences in a person's life.

By "relational characteristic" I mean that gender has to do with relationships. Gender is irreducibly social and biological. And this is why all definitions of gender as an essence are doomed to failure. Gender is what happens when a changing biological creature, created for sexual reproduction, travels through life in relationship with other sexed creatures who all seek to navigate their sexuality within social forms, conventions, rules, taboos, and expressions, all of which are again rooted in environment and context.

This means that gender indeed changes dramatically over the course of a person's life. Perhaps there are brain-chemistry factors in fetal development that predispose us in certain ways. That would simply be one factor among many others. But the gender of a little child is very different to that of an adolescent,¹⁴ a married middle-aged person, or an elderly person. Similarly, the gender of a single man is markedly different to the gender of a married father. Not only does fatherhood lead to lower testosterone levels in men, it also leads to vastly different cultural expectations of a man. A father will present himself differently. A father who goes to the gym and takes off his wedding ring is

¹⁴ Many ancient cultures thus had coming of age rituals that recognized a transition in social role that often comes with a new gender identity of adult male or female. Even in the Greek language of the NT, children are in the neuter gender rather than masculine or feminine, perhaps conveying a similar idea that children are not yet male or female even if they have male and female reproductive organs. Since these are nonfunctional until puberty, the relation of boy to girl is vastly different to man and woman.

notably trying to pose as a different gender identity, i.e. single, for the sake of seeking to live like a single person. In a sense, we could say that adultery is a gender-based and not simply a sex-based moral failure. If fatherhood is a kind of gender expression, then adultery is a violation of good fatherhood.

To generalize “all men should be like this” as marketing often does,¹⁵ is a clear oversimplification of the differences between who I was as a 23-year-old young single man, and a 40-year-old married father of two young girls. My body has changed, my appearance has changed, my self-care routines have changed, and above all, my relationships have changed. I don’t look at women or men in the same ways I used to, and that’s not just about sexual desire or competition, I simply have vastly different priorities, and thus seek to meet other people in different social contexts in which sexual outcomes have no place. That also means stereotyped marketing for teenage boys trying to convince them they are more manly doesn’t work on me at all. I don’t care about driving a muscle car anymore. I’m not looking to impress anyone, at least not in those *juvenile* ways. Hence the stereotype of the midlife crisis involves men acting in juvenile ways, looking to reclaim a gender identity that is now gone, but that they try to simulate with fast cars and adulterous fantasies, or other forms of self-gratification. A similar story can be told from female perspectives as well.

So, to try to reduce gender to male and female looks patently absurd. And thus comes the conversation about transgenderism and queerness. There are a wide variety of human characters. The tragedy of transgenderism and the queer movement is that it reinforces the problem it is trying to solve. By reacting harshly to gender stereotypes that a person doesn’t feel like he or she matches, even in cases where violence has been done to a person sexually or through bullying, the anti-norming rebellion often reinforces the validity of the norming conversation. Speaking for myself, as a boy who was always one of the smallest children in his class (even among girls), and a boy who was also very shy, intellectually gifted, mentally aloof, I never had a chance of living into teenage masculine stereotypes. Were I a child 20 years later, I might have been told I was queer. But that would have been to introduce a different form of violence, imposing a static identity on a developing individual boy who

¹⁵ Marketing, again as an expression of corporation mindedness, works off of maximum effect and so often helps foster stereotypes in order to expand the target market and increase sales.

could and did chart out his own way of being a boy and then a man in the world. To deny being a man because I don't measure up to cultural guidelines *is to legitimize those cultural norms!* So, the solution to cultural norming cannot be queering, trans*, or non-binary, because these do absolutely nothing to solve the real issue—an understanding of gender that is extraordinarily oversimplified because it's rooted in imaginary essences that are actually social value-judgments. To separate gender from biological sex introduces a cognitive dissonance that, one could argue, does significant psychological harm because, rather than navigating one's own life story as a boy or girl, woman or man, the trans* and non-binary movement seeks to provide solutions by dissociating a person's sense of self from their body. And this is because they are allowing the world to form their own understanding of their own bodies according to stereotypes. Or, as I've argued elsewhere in this book, we are being told to modify our bodies because we have no real political or economic power to actually modify the conditions of our environment or context in meaningful ways, and so we are being told, both in cis-normative and trans-pride narratives, that *our bodies* are the problem, *not the political and economic contexts*. All of us are being told to reshape our bodies into some other image, through beauty influencers, workout influencers, and those who reject them and so identify as trans to self-mutilate in order to buy more stuff or create more powerful coalition.

Here we can see, again, that this is really a political or corporate conversation. By forming a person in stereotyped images politicians get more votes and businesses grow their market. Norming is a power-move used by people who want to use you for their ends. In a sense, this whole conversation about gender could be seen as little more than a massive social engineering marketing experiment.

What's the solution to this problem? The answer is, we need to empower people to be able to tell their own stories in healthy relationships to others and to their contexts. In the church, we might call this a "testimony." But it goes deeper than just sharing stories. We need to create contexts in which the character of ourselves is known as we are, loved as we are, and sought to go on to maturity as who we could be if only other people would invest in us... Perhaps Christianity could offer something remarkably different?

Church as the Context and Environment of Gender

Theologically, Galatians 3:28 is the defining text for gender discussions. Paul makes it clear that being in Christ means that there are neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. For Paul, the logic is that we have been buried with Jesus in baptism and have “put on” or “clothed ourselves” in Jesus. Now, if we go back to thinking theologically in terms of essences or ontologies, we’ll end up either proposing that Paul thinks gender is passing away and that in the new creation there will be no gender, or we’ll propose that gender is “fixed” or repaired, as do Vale does. Neither of these options makes much sense to my mind. To claim that sexuality or gender is “broken” or “fallen”—terms the Bible never uses to describe any sin—rather than describing sin as “powers” that are prowling around looking for someone to devour, disables us as Christians and forces us into a victim narrative. It makes us helpless beggars, waiting for Jesus to come and fix everything. Now, we can’t fix everything ourselves, obviously. But we cannot make excuses for systemic evils like marketing stereotyping as “it’s just business” and then lament that some girls don’t like pink barbies or that some boys do. Which is more plausible, a confused child evincing brokenness, or the Walmart toy isle evincing intentional social engineering to maximize profits? Certainly, there can be some of both, but the reality is that mega corporations do employ social engineers and have done so for decades now, just as nations have employed propaganda departments for over a century now that regularly play off of gender-based identity conversations. The child’s identity is not the main problem, it’s a symptom of living in a “present evil age” and a “domain of darkness” that often use the power of scalability and the normalization that goes with it to transform diverse people into revenue streams. Blue vs. pink is more about limiting SKUs¹⁶ and maximizing market share by changing market expectations to want a limited set of aesthetics in toys.

“Putting on Christ” is not taking on a new essence (hence the language of clothing), but taking on a new context, a new master, a new voice of authority. Baptism isn’t about transforming human ontology; it’s about changing allegiances. What this means is that Jesus offers a new way to tell our

¹⁶ “Stock keeping unit” also sometimes referred to as a UPC (universal product code). In retail and manufacturing, businesses often try to reduce the number of different units they have because just having differences contributes to higher upkeep and administrative workload.

whole life stories, not in a way that conforms everyone to the same thing, erasing differences. It gives us a new primary relationship that can transform our stories. It is within a narrative mode that our past matters, and so gender is never “lost” or erased or done away with. Gender is mediated in Christ and gender becomes an expression of Christ in us. And just as therapy often revolves around a retelling of our past to give it a new framework, so too does Christ give us a new framework for our gendered lives. Jesus changes every aspect of gender, not by directly working on the body itself, though that is possible, but by transforming the terms in which we tell our stories, *and creating a new context to live out our stories within*. Jesus reveals sin by giving us a story of being enslaved and conformed to patterns of a sinful world,¹⁷ tossed about by every shifting wind and wave.¹⁸ Every aspect of our gendered story has been impacted by the present evil age. And this happens differently for different people. Some have experienced the most horrific sexual assaults that might have produced incredible shame. Jesus gives a way to identify the perpetrators as sinners, but also as victims themselves of the ruler of the age who thought that violating a person would accrue value to them. Jesus gives a liberation to such a person, not just by platitudes, but by creating a new context to live out new life within.

That new context is called the church. By “church” I certainly do not mean a corporation that provides worship events in specific buildings. I mean the people of God, coming together to intentionally engineer an alternate environment in which gender has totally different frameworks to those of the world, even if our biology hasn’t changed at all.

The key goal, then, is not to give the world an ideal gender identity—that would be to contribute to the problem—but to give the world a kingdom-shaped context and social group in which the kingship of Christ mediates all questions of gender identity. This doesn’t eliminate youth group crushes, singles ministry marriages, marriage counseling, or wrestling with singleness as a choice beyond reaction to rejection. What it does do is provide a distinctly Christian framework that is more than morally formative. We appeal not just to the will, but also to the powers that shape the body and the mind. We intentionally teach the youth about how imitation works, about how cliques work, about these adolescent forms of normalization-as-power-plays that the

¹⁷ Rom 12:2.

¹⁸ Eph 4:14.

world thrives upon in politics and business. We teach children to be chaste in their sexuality until marriage as a *Christian adolescent gender*, for reasons I discuss in the marriage chapter and Emily Hamilton discusses in the singleness chapter in this book. We teach married couples how to use their marriages as schools of discipleship, and how gender expectations from family of origin, for example, might lead to future conflict, and how marital roles need not be *gendered* at all, but play into the characteristics of the individuals themselves.

And when we're ready for our churches to take those next steps that would allow the world to see in us a radically different alternative to its own culture war and gender confusion, then we have to ask some seriously challenging questions. How do we foster contexts in which people have a sense of meaning and ownership in the community? How do we ensure that everyone is known? How do we ensure that people have a sense of social security and trust in the people of God so that they feel belonging enough to narrate their gendered story within the terms of God's people? How do we need to repent of perpetuating gender stereotypes? How do we move toward a real community based on trust and belonging and away from a value-add service provider that utilizes marketing and aims at scalability through norming our congregation into predictable patterns of "giving units?"

In other words, how do we make church an actual viable context within which people can live and move and have their being? And in all this, how do we also then send our mature people into the world to preach the good news of a God who doesn't respect our self-definitions and supposed essences, but who evaluates us individually and has shown such great valuation for each of us that he would choose to give his very life for us?

It seems that ECO could transform its fraught position as occupying a political no-persons-land into a major asset by transforming our churches into real contexts for whole-life discipleship. There's a long way to go and change must certainly start with ourselves. How do we transform the way we engage with gender as an "order" of pastors and officers? How do we not just hold one another to account, but help one another retell our own life stories in ways that move gender away from value-based conversations of whole groups, and toward recognizing individuals who are all encountering the world as sexed bodies at every moment?

“Love one another as I have loved you.”¹⁹ This is the way we should narrate “gender” to the church. Jesus died for you, not respecting your masculinity or femininity. And he will raise you up, not to be more fully male or female, but to sum up your journey toward maturity as it has been informed by being a man or woman. Adult maturity is not expressed by the frequency or quality of sexual encounters, even if within marriage. Gender is about far more than sex. Thank God, and let us

set your minds on things above... and put to death whatever is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed... Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free; but Christ is all and in all!²⁰

¹⁹ Jn 13:34, 15:12; and many similar phrasing throughout the NT.

²⁰ Col 3:2, 5, 9-11.

Part 3: Applications

In this final part of the book, we address some of the most common practical questions the team has received over the past two years of research. While the team does not offer authoritative advice or perspectives, our goal is to offer thoughts and perspectives for your discernment.

Hopefully, applications come as the fruit of thinking through foundations and implications, and it is our strong desire that readers engage with the previous chapters rather than trying to have a question answered quickly and easily. The issues this book has raised go far beyond basic inclusion/exclusion and identity and aim toward pastoral outcomes rather than systematic policy.

Bathrooms and Hospitality

Rev. Dr. Bobby Griffith

In 2014, I co-pastored a young urban church blessed to purchase a property even while it was still not self-governing. It was an older, historic property. Thankfully, we only had about \$500,000 of remodeling before making this our permanent home. Because it was an older church building, there were only two restrooms, built in the basement level. There was a balcony with a single restroom. Our leadership team debated what to do with this restroom and settled on making it gender neutral. We planned to have many public events. We also wanted to be a welcoming facility.

What struck me was a comment made by one of our future elders, who happened to be a social psychologist, about the need for a gender-neutral restroom. He said that if we wanted “all kinds of people” in our church, we needed to be prepared. We also needed to offer hospitality toward the population that experienced the highest number of infections stemming from anxiety that led them not to use restrooms - transgender folks.

In retrospect, we had no idea how God would allow us to use our facility. We hosted dozens of public events a year, ranging from concerts to teacher training for the school district. We even let a production company use the building as a green room while they filmed a movie across the street.

Every time, I led a person through the building, in preparation for an event, and explained the restroom situation (“hey this is an old building, we have two restrooms downstairs and a gender neutral restroom in the balcony”), I received feedback like this – “I have never heard of a church thinking about bathrooms. That’s really cool of you guys.” My typical reply would be something to the effect of – *we want to be good neighbors* or *we’re trying to be hospitable*.

Biblical Hospitality: Welcoming the Stranger

Hospitality is a central theme in both the Old and New Testaments, often associated with welcoming the stranger. The Greek word for hospitality, *philoxenia*, literally means “love of the stranger” (Romans 12:13). In the Old Testament, God commands the Israelites to care for the sojourner: “The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them

as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God." This directive to welcome and care for those who are different or marginalized continues in the New Testament, where Jesus teaches, "I was a stranger and you invited me in."

In this light, hospitality is not merely a social expectation but a divine command, rooted in the character of God, who welcomes us who were strangers into his family through Christ. By offering a gender-neutral bathroom, the church can extend this hospitality to individuals who might otherwise feel excluded or uncomfortable. Such a gesture aligns with the biblical call to "accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Romans 15:7).

The Imago Dei: Affirming Dignity and Worth

As Christians, we hold the belief that every person is created in the image of God. This truth undergirds the inherent dignity and worth of all individuals, regardless of their gender or gender identity. Jesus Himself consistently affirming the dignity of those who were marginalized by society. Through the affirmation of inherent dignity, he was able to serve and bring spiritual or physical healing.

In the Gospels, we see Jesus reaching out to those who were often ostracized or deemed unworthy by the religious and social standards of his time. He spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), healed the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:25-34), and touched lepers whom others shunned (Luke 17:11-19). In each instance, Jesus saw beyond societal labels and prejudices, addressing the person's deeper needs and restoring their dignity.

Providing a gender-neutral bathroom is a tangible way for the church to affirm the worth of individuals whose gender identity may not fit traditional categories. It acknowledges their humanity and their need for safety and dignity within the church community.

Loving Our Neighbor: The Great Commandment

Jesus summarized the law and the prophets with the command to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. This commandment challenges Christians to consider how their actions—or inactions—affect others. Loving

our neighbor involves empathy, understanding, and a willingness to meet people where they are, especially in their vulnerabilities.

The provision of a gender-neutral bathroom can be seen as a response to this commandment. For many individuals, particularly those who identify as transgender or non-binary, using gendered bathrooms can be a source of anxiety and fear. Furthermore, the stress and fear of using gender-specific bathrooms often lead transgender and non-binary individuals to avoid using public restrooms altogether. This avoidance can result in serious health issues, such as urinary tract infections (UTIs), which are more common in transgender and non-binary individuals due to delayed urination and other factors related to bathroom access.

Research indicates that transgender individuals, especially those who avoid using public restrooms due to fear or discomfort, are at a significantly higher risk for urinary tract infections. One extensive survey found that nearly 60% of transgender people reported avoiding public restrooms due to fear of confrontation or harassment. This avoidance often leads to holding urine for extended periods, which increases the risk of developing UTIs and other complications.

By offering a gender-neutral bathroom, the church can alleviate these concerns and demonstrate a Christ-like love that seeks to protect and care for the vulnerable. Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates the radical nature of this love. The Samaritan went out of his way to care for a man who had been beaten and left for dead, despite the fact that Jews and Samaritans were historically enemies. This story teaches that our neighbor is anyone in need.

Attending Marriage Services

Rev. Dr. Eric Laverentz

Introduction

In 2023 preacher Scottish born Cleveland pastor Alistair Begg created controversy with advice to a grandmother who struggled with whether a decision to attend her grandchild's wedding to someone who is transgender. Begg opposes any other wedding besides the traditional one man and one woman. Begg not only told the grandmother to go but to bring a gift. Begg's reason was: "Your love for them may catch them off guard, but your absence will simply reinforce the fact that they said, 'These people are what I always thought: judgmental, critical, unprepared to countenance anything.' Begg was heavily criticized among conservative evangelicals for his assertion. When given the chance to clarify or withdraw his remarks, Begg didn't back down. Among those criticizing Begg was John MacArthur who asserted "The most loving thing you could possibly do would be not to go, and to condemn the relationship; that is loving. It's not loving to help somebody celebrate stepping into the fury of God's judgment." This a question for Christians, in a post-Obergefell world, that will become increasingly common. Begg's rationale is boilerplate and will sound especially so for Christians who come from a mainline background—you go to show to love to the person whom you care about and not do something that causes you to appear judgmental. Is this correct logic and the proper way to think about attending a same sex or transgender wedding? Is the question "What is most loving thing to do?" The problem with using "What is more loving as rationale?" is that it is a question that can never be answered. It is akin to what philosopher Alasdair McIntyre calls "a debate interminable character" Christians are called sometimes to live in the tension of unresolved questions between our present reality. What other questions might Christians ask besides, "What is more loving?" to determine our attendance at a wedding that is not heterosexual?

1. Does our participation in a same sex wedding make us complicit in sin?

If we presume the action of same sex intimacy to be sinful, at least on an equal plane with other sexual sin, how would we address being asked to

support or endorse such acts? If a married friend approached us and asked for our help to have an affair, what would our response be? A Christian response, of course, would be, “Absolutely not. I will not help you violate your covenant. The hope would be that a Christian would have a similar response for help with a similar kind of sinful act—stealing, lying or injuring someone else. If we are causing or encouraging another to sin or we are misleading them about our intentions we are to be held accountable. Matthew 18:6 seems to make this plain, “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” To attend a same sex wedding uncritically and, at least on the face, supportively does, at the least, bless a sinful act and leads a person to a unrepentant posture. .

2. *Does our participation in a same sex wedding constitute engaging in apostasy?*

Another way to think about the decision is to think how we would feel about attending a worship service where there was apostasy being preached or could we faithfully attend a worship service in another religion? Not every non-traditional wedding is an overt worship service but there is certainly a theology at least implicitly present. The question here is what point does such our participation in such a service glean over into “light blending with darkness or fellowship with Belial” (2 Corinthians 6:15). We would certainly question attending an event where neo-Nazi doctrine was proclaimed. Most mature Christians would walk out of a worship service where even mainstream political doctrine was proclaimed as akin to the Kingdom of God. While worshipping on vacation, my family and I once exited a worship where prosperity gospel was preached. The relevant question of when does “fellowship with Belial” occur is not always so simple. At our Presbytery meetings while in PC (USA), I sat through many services I considered heretical but not necessarily apostate. Only when I judged my colleagues had crossed over into apostasy and it was preached from the pulpit and celebrated did I break from the fellowship. If marriage is one of a handful of universal institutions created by God, what does celebrating its plain corruption suggest? Could one say it represents an embrace of apostasy? Our standards here might be different for a Christian wedding rather than a secular ceremony. Where no overt claim about Christ is made, it may be easier for the Christian to attend.

3. Does our theology of covenant suggest about attending a same sex wedding?

Complicating the matter of covenant is the idea that same-sex marriage is no covenant at all, if we follow the Christian understanding of covenant. Marriage, Genesis 2, makes clear is covenant between one man and one woman. The state, post-Obergfell, may recognize a legal arrangement but from a Biblical perspective, no covenant exists. There is an imitation of a covenant. So we need to be clear that we are weighing honoring what is an imitation of a covenant with relationships that have a covenantal character—family and Christian friendship. Important to Begg's example is the detail that it was a grandmother wrestling with the decision to attend her grandchild's wedding. Clearly, the closer the relationship, the more difficult the decision comes for a Christian who holds to Biblical and traditional views. It is clearly less difficult to not attend the non-traditional wedding of a co-worker, a neighbor or the son or daughter of an old friend than it would be to not attend the wedding of a niece or grandchild or even son or daughter. This goes beyond the question of whether to merely show love through our presence or absence. The presence of a covenant between family members is what underlies the decision. What does the family covenant demand? Does it demand presence at all family events, especially those which an entire family *pertains* to enter into a covenant? I have a pastor friend, a known evangelical leader and influential teacher, author of several books whose son married another man in California. Even though he is opposed to his son's actions, he attended. Not only that, several pastor colleagues attended as well in support of their friend. They attended in the words of one, "As his brother in Christ." Their theology of Christian friendship (which they saw as covenantal) placed them there for support of their friend in a moment of crisis.

4. Does the status of the participants as followers of Christ impact our decision?

Do we hold Christians entering a non-heterosexual wedding more accountable than non-Christians? My wife and I once attended a wedding of a relative that turned out to be pagan. The wedding was authorized by the state of Missouri but at no point did they call upon Jesus Christ or a generic god to bless their union. Instead, they invoked the "divine consciousness" and even

“Mother Nature.” We discussed it afterward and were not surprised given what we knew about them—nice and pleasant people who don’t share our faith in Jesus Christ. We didn’t seek to hold them accountable afterward. We had a nice time at the reception although the service was certainly uncomfortable and we couldn’t help but be concerned for the happy couple. But we didn’t hold them accountable. Clearly we would not allow a service like that in our sanctuaries. If members of our church held a service, we might very well seek to hold them accountable because it clearly doesn’t conform to our Christian beliefs, as we are assuming a same sex wedding would. But we hold non-believers to a different standard. They are outside of our communion and it would be strange to hold such a person accountable. Ironically it may be more permissible to attend a same sex wedding of non-Christians rather than believers invoking the name of Jesus Christ over their union. We tend to hold all individuals to the same, Christian standard but we are taught to have higher standards for those who confess Christ.

5. Does a wedding’s ontological difference from other events create opportunities?

The discussion around attending a wedding is theologically charged in part because a wedding, in the Christian understanding, should be an act of worship. We have discussed that above. A Christian who refused to attend the graduation of a gay cousin or the art show of a lesbian neighbor, would certainly be straying into questionable behavior. If someone chooses not to attend a gay or lesbian wedding, how can they maintain the relationship and enter into the life of their friend or family member in a way that does not compromise their integrity? Although it may be difficult for the LGBTQ individual whose invitation was shunned, there is nothing to say that a friendship afterward cannot still be pursued and that person’s value, particularly to you, can still be affirmed. The Christian can still demonstrate love even amid the rejection of a wedding invitation. As far as it depends upon us “we can still live peaceably with all.” (Romans 12:18) Support and affirmation need not only happen on others’ terms.

Legal vs. Christian Marriage

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

The fact of the matter is that the definition of marriage civilly has changed in the United States, as marriage itself has changed from an institution of procreation and pedagogy in which two become one to create and foster new life. This hasn't been a crusade of liberalization, but the accumulation of many factors that have changed the normal patterns of human social life over the past century. Modern understandings of marriage fit the environment in which they exist. The notion of destination weddings, weddings that function as royalty cosplay for all participants, all lead to a focus on a love that encloses a couple into private spaces with little to no expectation of public difference based on the coupling.

In essence, modern civil marriage is a legal affirmation of "love," if by "love" we mean the economics of dual income and cohabitation. Within this context, legislating the gender identities of those involved in such arrangements doesn't make sense. Maximal power for government comes from maximal affirmation of (and thus subjugation of) identity. For an authority to affirm or approve enshrines a hierarchy in which the social unit of family or couple derives its identity from the state and thus owes fealty to it. Rights and freedoms are simply exceptions to those places where authorities exercise control. And thus, the freedom to marry any gender identity is an expression of the state recognizing that the facts of human coupling have changed, and that better policy is to "grant" such freedoms.

As we've seen, the picture of marriage between the church and the world has diverged significantly. It is worth noting that marriage itself has not been the purview of the church from the beginning. The Roman Catholic Church only started getting involved in civil marriages in the 12th century, and there only for the nobility. Common law cohabitation-marriage was the civilizational norm until relatively recently. It is worth understanding that the Roman Catholic sacrament of marriage is consummated in sex... and that means that for them the act of intercourse *is marriage*. That's important because it shows both why the church wasn't involved in rituals or ceremonies for most people for most of its history, and why interest in noble marriages

developed. Establishing the legitimacy of an heir was vital in cases of inherited property and power. So we even saw that the church and famous theologians like Martin Luther held some double-standards about marriage.¹ The rich and powerful could keep mistresses. Peasants should be monogamous and sort out the details themselves.

The state's interest in marriage, then, has largely been about securing its income through taxation and probate law. Nation-states do not acknowledge "love" as a politically valid concept and they do not care about affirmations that do not build constituencies and secure votes.

For these reasons, and others, some within ECO have decided that they will conscientiously refuse to perform any civil or legal ceremony. By this view, marriages are performed as establishing a new household focused on discipleship. Weddings are acts of Christian worship, then, only when they are covenant-making celebrations, not just between the couple, but with the wider families, community, and God. Ecclesial marriage is thereby established, rather than civil marriage.

Others might see the performing of marriages as both a financial boon to the church, or a form of outreach. I was approached during my transitional pastorship by an elder who wanted to utilize the church for outside weddings as a source of income. I reflected then, and would still hold this view nine years later, that financial schemes like this are mission drift. If the church wants to actively engage in mission to the LGBTQ community, then that needs to be a strategic, well-considered, intentional, and honest move, not one that is haphazardly done in order to help with cashflow.

Those who refuse to sign legal papers certifying a marriage (of any variety) model normal practices in Europe where papers are signed at civic locations (often a courthouse), and the ceremony then takes place in the house of God. Perhaps we could say that we render to Caesar what this Caesar's and to God what is God's. Christian marriage is about discipleship. Christian weddings should highlight this fact with somber gravity associated with the making of lifelong vows, both between the couple and with the wider community. This is no small matter and should be done with prayerful consideration. But a Christian wedding also ought to be a celebration that God has brought these two together. Christian weddings are not celebrations of

¹ See discussion in Chapter 10.

eros, not the moment of liberation of youthful libido, but the initiation of a new relationship that uses erotic love for the fostering of life and actively seeks to grow beyond it to *agape*.

This is an entirely different category to state-sanctioned legal marriage. I would advocate that whether pastors continue to sign legal papers or refuse to do so that we are now presented with a striking and wonderful opportunity to rediscover marriage as the school of discipleship that embodies *agape*, and so becomes a micro-expression of the church. And for this reason, I would also suggest that this is the positive reason why we reject marrying people engaged in and LGBT identity or practice. Rather than giving reasons why it is wrong, we can then focus on the gospel expressed through discipleship. LGBT is an erotic identity, as is heterosexuality. Christian marriage is not a celebration of heterosexual relationships. It is an acknowledgement of the power of God to refine the couple and produce in them continued opportunities to give their lives for one another in ways that also hopefully produce and foster new life.

Christian marriage is not an affirmation of two peoples' life choice, it is, like baptism, a recognition of God's faithfulness and his call to costly discipleship.

Membership

Rev. Dr. Eric Laverentz

A common question for some evangelical and conservative pastors and sessions wrestle with is “What happens if an openly, unapologetic, self-identifying LGBTQ+ person desires membership in our congregation?” The vast number of Christians have long championed the conviction that anyone, regardless of any sin or perspective about Jesus Christ, is welcome at any church gathering be it youth group, Sunday School, small groups, or worship. Those gathering cannot be polluted by lack of faith among the participants. We typically present no bar other than non-disruptive participation.

Taking the theological stakes a little higher, many congregations no longer ‘fence’ the communion table. We merely ask people to self-police that they are not beset by sin in some way or in conflict with their neighbor and they trust and believe in Jesus Christ. We even welcome non-members and members alike to partake in communion. This is a relatively new perspective for Presbyterians who in most quarters, as late as 125 years ago, required a communion token to assure their seat at the table of our Lord. The token was dispensed by elders who visited families in their homes and found everything in good, Christian order. This was part and parcel of a long neglected ‘third mark’ of the Church— “where discipline is faithfully practiced.”

We have largely moved on from that model of Church in western culture and our departure is what complicates the question of obvious sin in our members. Here is the dilemma. If we don’t seek ordinary discipline (a well-disciplined, Christlike life in obedience to the Scriptures) from all of members, what right do we have to demand it from anyone?

For example, if an engaged couple who were living together began to worship in a congregation, most churches would not balk at embracing them fully as members. The same likely goes for a man who makes his living in a business that does not conform to the Biblical witness. In one congregation I served one of our members owned casinos. We don’t correct people for sporadic worship attendance. There was a time not so long when members were suspended from taking communion for being publicly drunk, engaging in dishonest commerce, theft, working on the Sabbath and committing adultery. This was the practice of Reformed Christians everywhere for from

the early 1500's until the late 19th and early 20th century. But there is no historical memory of that ubiquitous practice now.

Today, we typically place a very low standard on church membership.

The question of “What happens if an openly, unapologetic, self-identifying LGBTQ+ person desires membership in our congregation?” rests upon our ecclesiology. If the church is merely a place where the word is faithfully preached and the sacraments are rightly administered, then there is little reason to bar inclusion. With only those two marks, little to nothing is asked of the membership.

However, if we seek discipleship for our members and growth in Christ, as we should, allowing people engaged in obvious sin, unrepentantly, is a great problem. It is a problem on two levels.

First, it is a problem for the individuals in question because unrepentant, persistent sin calls into question our salvation. Hebrews 10:26-27 is just one place where this is proclaimed:

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

In terms of sexual sin 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 paints a similarly grim picture:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

It is no one's place to say who God will redeem and who he will not. But if someone remains unwilling to conform something as fundamental as their sexuality to the clear witness of Scripture with no accountability from the rest of the body of Christ, then it should raise significant questions about their salvation and our practice of discipleship. It is helpful to place any other sin in the place of homosexuality and ask, “Would a person who embraces such a sinful practice unrepentantly be allowed to become a member?” Imagine, for example, a woman is received by the Session to become a member, confesses Christ as Savior and Lord, promises to live as a disciple at the local congregation but also says, “I am a chronic shoplifter and I see nothing wrong

with it. It is fundamental to who I am.” Or a man says, “I affirm Jesus but I also love to gossip and I have no plans to change.” Would they be received as a member? One would hope not.

Second, if a gay or lesbian couple wished to become a member of a congregation, the public nature of their practice presents a challenge beyond the discipleship of those directly involved. Embracing the open practice of sin introduces disorder into the Body of Christ—which the Reformed tradition has traditionally railed against. The Greek word often translated as disorder has the heart of its meaning rebellion against authority. If the Church teaches the Biblical view of sexuality and yet allows those who confess Christ to blatantly live against that teaching, the authority of the word is compromised. This has implications for every believer in the congregation because it calls into question their decision to give the word of God authority in their life. The example that is set by others matters greatly in a Church that seeks to disciple its members. First Thessalonians is one just place this is championed:

You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.¹

In a congregation where sin of any type is unaddressed (not even celebrated) rebellion is fostered, witness is compromised and confused, and discipleship suffers. Of course, there is no perfect congregation and we don't want be intolerant of sinners but the persistent (especially public) practice of any sin undercuts the Gospel and devastates the culture.

¹ 1 Thessalonians 1:5-7.

A Debate: To Baptize the Child of a Same-Sex Couple?

Rev. Dr. Bobby Griffith and Rev. Jos Smolik

When churches seek to minister in the manner in which we see Jesus in the Gospels, there will be folks who come to be part of our church community who might not fit our paradigms. Yet the gospel is good news for all sinners. The love of Christ is a powerful love that Jesus himself says will draw all types of people to Him.

We also live in a time in history where same sex relationships make up 1.2% of marriages in the US. In a nation of 330 million, that is roughly 2.75 million. That is a greater number than the population fifteen different states.

Inevitably, we will have same-sex couples attend our churches. ECO's covenant partnership practices even include ambiguity in terms of membership as "open to all" who profess Christ. Our Essential Tenets declare that we believe God intends marriage to be a covenant between a man and woman. We reserve ordained office to those who agree to abide by this and will practice celibacy or be married to someone of the opposite sex.

Increasingly, churches run into an issue of baptizing children whose parents are in a same sex relationship. Our polity leaves the practice of admittance to the sacrament of baptism to the session. But how is a session to decide in the instance a same-sex couple wishes to have their child baptized at an ECO church?

Below we will consider this from two perspectives. The first will make a case for why the session should approve such a baptism. The second will make a case for why the session should not approve such a baptism.

View 1: We Will Baptize Your Child

In the New Testament, Paul declares that baptism has replaced circumcision.¹ In baptism, we are identified with Christ. We declare our engagement to be the Lord's. When we baptize infants or children, who have not yet made a profession of faith, we declare that they are holy before the

¹ Col 2:11-12.

Lord.² We affirm the reality that the child belongs to the Lord and his Spirit works in their life at the appointed time of his council. In the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, we say that “it be a great sin...to neglect this ordinance,” though we recognize that salvation and baptism are not explicitly connected so that one cannot happen without the other.

In the case of a same-sex couple bringing a request to have their child baptized, this is a moment in which we can witness God at work through the sacrament. While ECO’s confessional documents do not support our ministers performing same-sex marriages, nor do our Essential Tenets give credence to our culture’s acceptance, even promotion, of same-sex marriage, there is warrant in the Scriptures for why this child can be baptized.

In the Old Testament, we have several examples of circumcisions performed on males who were not the product of monogamous, heterosexual marriages. Within the patriarchs, we know of Ishmael, birthed from Abraham’s concubine, Hagar, as well as Jacob and Esau, born to Isaac’s second wife, in a polygamous marriage. Jacob’s sons, the Twelve Tribes of Israel, were circumcised, though products of polygamy. Judah’s sons, Perez and Zerah, were a product of Tamar and Judah’s sexual encounter, yet were not denied circumcision. Both kings Saul and David practiced polygamy, and we know of their sons who received the covenant sign of circumcision, notably Solomon – the son of peace.

These examples are not exhaustive but provide something illustrative concerning our own day. We might see God’s covenant signs as belonging to those who live with complete obedience to his will, however, these signs are grace for sinners. The Old Testament, especially, provides example after example of people who do not follow God’s design for worship, for family, for loving their neighbor, even failing to fulfill their own obligations to be the Lord’s as His people, yet his grace shines through the failure of his followers. Neither Ishmael, nor Solomon were denied circumcision due to their fathers’ disobedience; they were brought into the number of God’s people through the sign and seal of the covenant God made with Abraham.

There is a reality of God’s grace we might miss when we focus solely on conformity, or expectations of people’s sanctification, particularly related to this issue. God keeps his covenant despite the reality his people are “prone

² 1 Cor 7:14.

to wander.” Consider the fact the sons of Jacob, who became the namesakes of the twelve tribes of Israel, were born from four women: Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah. This shows the power of God’s grace. His covenant is true and works through diverse and complicated family backgrounds.

Pastorally, this perspective encourages the church to administer the sacraments to infants, recognizing that sanctification is a lifelong journey, marked by God’s grace and the nurturing faith community. The obligation placed on the infant to be the Lord’s is not negated by the parents’ circumstances but is rather an invitation for the church to extend God’s covenantal grace inclusively. Just as Jesus welcomed little children and blessed them,³ the church is called to embrace all children within the covenant, trusting that the Spirit will work in their lives, regardless of their familial situations. This inclusive approach aligns with the Reformed emphasis on God’s sovereignty and grace, affirming that God’s redemptive plan encompasses all who are brought into the community of faith, reflecting the messy yet redemptive reality of sanctification in a broken world.

In a post-Christian culture, the church finds itself navigating a landscape that mirrors the pre-Christian world in many ways. This context demands a flexible approach to evangelism and community-building, recognizing that the Gospel meets people where they are, within their diverse and often complex life situations. Just as the early Christians encountered varied familial structures, cultural practices, and moral landscapes, today’s church must engage with a society where traditional paradigms of marriage and family are increasingly varied. This diversity necessitates a pastoral response that prioritizes grace, understanding, and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit over rigid conformity to idealized standards.

The reality of sin and sanctification being inherently messy is evident in both scriptural and historical examples. The Old Testament patriarchs, such as Abraham, Jacob, and David, often found themselves in complicated marital and familial arrangements. Yet, God’s covenantal promises remained steadfast, and His purposes were fulfilled through their lives. In the New Testament, Jesus encountered people from all walks of life, including those living in ways contrary to Jewish law, such as the Samaritan woman at the well⁴ and the

³ Mk 10:13-16.

⁴ Jn 4.

woman caught in adultery.⁵ In each case, Jesus extended grace and called for a transformative response, without immediate demands for drastic alterations in their personal circumstances. This approach highlights that the process of sanctification is a journey, often fraught with complexities that require time and spiritual growth.

View 2: We Should Withhold Baptism from The Family

Baptism is the sole work of God. It is a sacrament, a sign within which God alone acts to confirm our ingrafting into Christ and to seal for us the benefits of the covenant of grace.⁶ Because it is God's work, when we administer baptism in the Lord's name, we have the significant responsibility of attending to the spiritual condition of those receiving baptism (in the case of adults) and attending to the spiritual condition of those seeking baptism for others (in the case of parents for infants). A church is not a religious service provider; instead, we are accountable to God as a community of new covenant people, and our mandate includes the proper administration of the sacraments. Because of this sacramental nature of baptism and the important role it plays in the spiritual life of individuals and the church, there are a handful of reasons why – with heavy hearts – we should withhold baptism from the children of those in open same-sex marriages.

1. We do not administer baptism outside of the relational connection of church fellowship and the institution of covenant partnership.⁷ A stranger cannot come in off the street and receive baptism for themselves or for a child. Baptism implies meaningful relationship with the church and offering the sacrament of baptism to the children of covenant partners implies the discipleship of parents of those children. In the New Testament, baptism, like circumcision before it, is offered to those in believing households. But those believing households were then bound by the expectation of meaningful discipleship. Covenantal belief is evidenced by the growth in discipleship and obedience; and this is what we should expect from those seeking baptism for children. The early church had robust moral standards for those seeking to join

⁵ Jn 8:1-11.

⁶ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q94.

⁷ *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q166.

the church through baptism, and we can reliably assume they had the same moral standards for those seeking to baptize their children into the same covenant community.

2. We offer baptism to an infant in the expectation that her/his parents will reliably raise the child to value and fulfill the baptismal vows of discipleship and obedience. Parents vow on behalf of the child—who is too young to even understand what is happening—that they will raise the child to know and follow Jesus. As part of these vows, we ask them to abandon the works of the flesh and pursue a life of faith and commitment to Christ. For a child to be raised in the home of an open and practicing same-sex couple, we would have reason to question the fulness of that commitment since same-sex sexual practice lies outside the bounds of accepted practice according to our theological convictions.

3. ECO's *Essential Tenets* do not merely bind our pastors, but they also bind our churches. Although our polity allows for some ambiguity around church membership, it does not allow for ambiguity around the central theological commitments spelled out in our tenets. Among those theological convictions is the assertion that marriage is intended to be a covenant between one man and one woman. (We also affirm that celibacy in singleness is a full and valid expression of human sexuality). Because our conviction is that there is no proper expression of marital faithfulness within same-sex partnerships, it would be inappropriate to baptize the child of such a partnership. The church is to administer sacraments and to enact church discipline, which may involve the withholding of certain privileges (in this case, the baptism of a child belonging to those in a same-sex marriage) for the purposes of care and discipleship and obedience to our stated theological commitments.

4. The church is called to make disciples – discipleship includes a life that is brought into conformity with the Lord's revealed desire for individual holiness – including holiness as it shapes our sexual behavior. This means that a key concern in this baptism debate has to do with the spiritual life of the parents in question. Discipleship of others isn't easy in general, and may be even more difficult in the circumstance of a same-sex couple attending the church. We should rejoice in that couple's presence among the worshipping community, but we should also seek to gently, prayerfully and meaningfully engage that couple in a call to discipleship; which would also include a call to evaluate sexual practice in light of God's expectations for sexual behavior. The

effort to disciple this couple will undoubtedly require difficult conversations, but not necessarily fruitless ones. Discipleship necessitates discipline, and it is kindness that leads us to a knowledge of brokenness and subsequently to repentance and restoration.⁸ Our goal should not be to *ignore* the spiritual condition of parents seeking baptism for their children, but instead to *engage* parents around their readiness to raise children in lives of faithful obedience to God's commands.

It is important to add that even though we may withhold baptism, we do not—nor could we—withhold salvation. God alone draws, adopts, redeems and rescues those whom He chooses. Though the decision of whether or not to withhold the sacraments rests with an individual church and its leadership, the church does not decide who belongs to the redeemed family of God. Though we *should not* risk the implicit approval of unhealthy sexual practice by baptizing children of those in same-sex marriages, we *must not* risk the misunderstanding that by denying baptism we are shutting the doors of salvation to any individual—whether infant or adult.

⁸ Romans 2:4.

Breaking Worship?

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

I believe that gender and sexuality will break most church institutions who are unprepared to ask hard questions about their own mission, vision, values. I have seen many mission and vision statements that sound great, but inevitably work to justify common evangelical practices of throwing most of our resources at gathered worship events. After all, that's what the world expects of us. But this issue will cause churches to separate more and more into different sides of the culture war. Churches that legitimately want to offer the gospel of reconciliation will need a new strategy.

Here's the problem: to be "welcoming" means to affirm that diverse people have a place in a community, building, or event. In order for a public event to show welcome in an active way, this requires good optics. That is, a church ought to show up front the kind of people they want in the building. A church that is mostly white and only speaks English but wants to welcome Hispanic Spanish speakers needs to put them up front and have Spanish language components of the worship service. That's obvious for ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity. And it's obvious that a church that celebrates the gifts of women in ministry needs to demonstrate this by having women up front regularly performing all the roles men do.

But what about LGBT folks? Should a church communicate welcome by putting an openly gay or trans person up front? To do so would be to legitimize their lifestyle and identity choices. To not do so is to communicate that "welcoming" only extends to heterosexual and cis-gendered people.

In other words, church worship events cannot claim to be welcoming but not affirming. In the terms we introduced from Mark Yarhouse, a church that says homosexuality is a sin cannot claim to be welcoming to homosexual people who believe they have a legitimate claim to diversity. This means churches will have to fall into two camps: affirming or not-affirming. And LGBT people are not going to darken the doors of non-affirming churches.

So, what does a church do if it genuinely wants to pursue a gospel of reconciliation and love its enemies? The answer has to be that church $\neq$ worship. A welcoming *event* is inclusive. But a welcoming *community* can maintain a distinction between insiders and welcomed outsiders, or "guests".

It does this by delimiting different spaces, times, and practices. Just as the temple of Jerusalem had a court for Gentiles, providing a clear indication that they were welcome to see some things, but absolutely not welcome inside, so too many religions have differentiated spaces that extend hospitality to outsiders. Hindu temples and Sikh gurdwaras often have free public meals open to anyone of any faith. Christian rescue missions operate similarly. Why have Christians largely outsourced welcome and hospitality to parachurch organizations? Part of our problem lies in the very existence of parachurch organizations... Somehow Christians came to believe that the “real” work of the church was gathered worship only and the supporting work involved all the other kinds of hospitality or material benefit work. Perhaps part of the reason we’re in this situation is an overspecialization of Christianity into silos that deform us and our discipleship by making loving our neighbors in concrete ways a work for paraprofessional Christians.

Making disciples is a process of inward movement, and we might say that every group has these kinds of movements or ranks. Biker gangs have people who can ride with them but aren’t yet part of them and haven’t received a patch. They have to determine if someone is fully “in” before bearing the symbols of representation.

If a church wants to maintain that the worship service is the best form of outreach, then it has to be intentionally welcoming and inclusive. If a church believes that a worship service is for insiders to go deeper, then it is intentionally exclusive, as was the case for the patristic church in which catechumens and visitors would be able to hear the sermon but not even witness the sacraments, let alone be welcome at them.

But it is not biblically valid that church = worship. The idea of gathered worship as the central defining act of Christianity is as old as perhaps the second century. But gathered worship is not the defining feature of the people of God in either the Old or New Testaments. While certainly the OT has religious rituals, these are often occasional, festive, or for purposes we have moved into medical institutions. Only with the rise of synagogues and Pharisaism during the Second Temple Period did weekly religious gatherings with teaching and exposition of the Bible become normative. And when Christians picked up this practice in Acts, they expressly did so *not as worship*.

We know that because they still went to the temple as Jews.¹ That is, they maintained their Jewish rituals as good Jews, but as Christians gathered for eating together, teaching, and having common resources. Christianity, we might say, began as a para-temple movement.

The solution to the problem of welcome and inclusion thus seems clearly to intentionally cultivate welcoming spaces and times outside of worship events. These things have long existed in programs like Alpha. Many church plants are pursuing “third space” mission in cafes, bars, restaurants where all are welcome. If a church wants to truly be welcoming to LGBT people, it must meet LGBT people in neutral spaces where inclusivity is expected. Churches should also cultivate interior spaces and times where discipleship is expected. Truly getting to know one another requires safety and trust. This is why all groups are, by their very nature, exclusive.

What then is the function of worship and who should be allowed? This is obviously for a church to determine. But I would say that, if we were forming an institutional framework with the desired outcome of “more and deeper disciples who are truly known and loved with Jesus’ love” we would not likely spend significant resources on large-scale public events. Concerts and motivational speaking, to look with secular eyes for a moment, excel at creating temporary communities of consumers united by shared subjective or emotive experiences who focus all attention on “the talent” and develop a parasocial relationship with the celebrity, rather than with one another. Stage-directed attention events are abysmal at the formation of anything like a real community that is seen in Acts 2. That doesn’t mean they are wrong inherently. It does mean that the arguments for putting most resources into gathered worship look more like justification of historic practice rather than a real strategy of making disciples.

Whatever the future holds, I do not think it will be feasible to expect regular visitors who are different to those represented by the onstage talent. Yes, there will be exceptions... but from a broad strategic point of view, the gospel of reconciliation must leave the temple and be taken to the streets. Everyone who desires to follow Jesus should have access to a mature disciple of Jesus who actively seeks out hearing their story in a safe space.

¹ Acts 2:46.

Confessional Leadership of an ECO Church

Rev. Dr. Troy Onsager

When it comes to leadership in ECO churches, whether as a pastor or officer (elder, deacon), how should we navigate questions surrounding gender and sexuality?

This article is a brief exploration of confessional leadership as it pertains especially to gender and sexuality conversations in two parts. The first is a discussion of our ECO Ordination Vows as they relate to the Essential Tenets and our Confessions. The second is a discussion of the practical import of our confessional stance in the role of ECO leadership in the roles of officers and staff.

ECO Ordination Vows and our Confession

The ordination vows for ECO, which flow from the historic ordination vows of Presbyterian ministry, follow a clear delineation of priority: our confession of God, our trust in Scripture, and our commitment to doctrine drawn from Scripture which binds the denomination in faith and life in the form of a confessional statement. In fact, the actual *peace, unity and purity* of the church depends on the commitment to these vows.

First, the confession of the triune God takes priority in leadership conversations. The confession of God as the triune Father, Son and Holy Spirit leads to the confession of Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, and the acknowledgment of his authority over the church:

Do you believe in One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and do you boldly declare Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and acknowledge Him Lord of all and Head of the Church?¹

Second, the confession of the Reformed *Scripture Principle*, that is, that the Holy Scriptures do not merely *contain* the word of God, but are the word of God to us, is critical for our confession:

¹ *ECO Constitution*, 18.

Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the Word of God, and, inspired by the Holy Spirit, the unique witness to Jesus Christ and the authority for Christian faith and life?²

Third, as Christ-Centered, trinitarian Christians who are committed to *sola Scriptura*, we then follow the confession of the Church as we are guided by theological and catechetical summaries of Scripture, which help guide each congregation's faith and life. Our own ECO ordination vows split up this third category into two separate sections: adherence to the Essential Tenets as the grounding summary of how we shall live as a denomination, and as the guidance of the confessions in our participation in God's mission, which undergird the composition of the Essential Tenets themselves:

Will you receive, adopt, and be bound by the **Essential Tenets of ECO** as a reliable exposition of what Scripture teaches us to do and to believe, and will you be guided by them in your life and ministry?

Relying on the Holy Spirit, do you humbly submit to God's call on your life, committing yourself to God's mission, and fulfilling your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, **under the authority of Scripture and guided by our confessions?**³

Our own Essential Tenets follow this structure as well. The Introduction states clearly that the *purpose* for which we were made - in the vein of the great confession of Westminster - is **"to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever."** However, this purpose - as the people of God - is inherently a trinitarian reality that flows from the one God revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁴

Each member of the church enjoys God by being so united with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit as to become a participant in that divine nature, transformed from one degree of glory to another and escorted by Christ into the loving communion of the Trinity.

² *ECO Constitution*, 18.

³ *ECO Constitution*, 18.

⁴ "Each member of the church enjoys God by being so united with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit as to become a participant in that divine nature, transformed from one degree of glory to another and escorted by Christ into the loving communion of the Trinity." *ECO Constitution*, 2.

This is further fleshed out in section two, which confesses the important “Central Christian Mysteries” of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Yet, in section one, the importance of Holy Scripture as the source of our understanding of the revelation of God is highlighted:

We glorify God by recognizing and receiving His authoritative self-revelation, both in the infallible Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and also in the incarnation of God the Son.⁵

The Essential Tenets further elucidate the importance of the conscience of the individual believer, which has been a hallmark of the Protestant tradition from the start. Critique of the tradition, or individuals in positions of ecclesiastical authority has always been allowed - yet only to the degree that this critique of the conscience is bound to and supported by Holy Scripture:

We confess that God alone is Lord of the conscience, but this freedom is for the purpose of allowing us to be subject always and primarily to God’s Word. The Spirit will never prompt our conscience to conclusions that are at odds with the Scriptures that He has inspired. The revelation of the incarnate Word does not minimize, qualify, or set aside the authority of the written Word.⁶

This is particularly important when the principle of the conscience has, at various times and places, been elevated above the role of Scripture.

The communal nature of the confessional task is further affirmed by the Essential Tenets, articulating that our theological heritage of as Reformed confessional Christians acknowledges particular confessions which provide doctrinal commentary on Holy Scripture for the community of faith:

We are happy to confess ourselves captive to the Word of God, not just individually, but also as members of a community of faith, extending through time and around the globe. In particular, we affirm the secondary authority of the following ECO Confessional Standards as faithful expositions of the Word of God: Nicene Creed, Apostles’ Creed, Heidelberg Catechism, Westminster Confession, Westminster Shorter

⁵ *ECO Constitution*, 2.

⁶ *ECO Constitution*, 2-3.

Catechism, Westminster Larger Catechism and the Theological Declaration of Barmen.⁷

The delineation of the confessions for our *ECO Confessional Standards* shows that our Essential Tenets are a faithful summary of the Reformed Confessions that have guided our Reformed theological tradition. When a pastor or an elder or a deacon seeks to find theological or pastoral guidance, these confessions exercise a “secondary authority” for our denomination in that we believe that they continue to speak to the church as a faithful expositions of what Scripture rightfully teaches.

ECO Leadership and Confessional Adherence

The importance of these vows should not be merely relegated to the question of individual purity - particularly with respect to questions of morality. Rather, the community as a whole has the responsibility to confess its faith, through a particular understanding of Scripture, as a form of its mission and witness to the world. To state what we believe and how we shall then live in light of these beliefs is at the heart of the confessional task of the church. The purpose of the Essential Tenets of ECO is to distill, as best as it can, the doctrinal core of the grand confessional documents of the Reformed theological tradition.

Chapter One of our polity, *Congregations and Their Covenant Partners*, immediately shows the desire for our leadership to be guided by our Essential Tenets:

Those who are invited to take significant leadership roles in the congregation should be spiritually mature, carefully selected, trained and/or mentored ordinarily be covenant partners for at least a year, and shall agree and adhere to the Essential Tenets of ECO. (1.0305)⁸

Chapter Two, *Ordained and Commissioned Ministry*, outlines that:

⁷ *ECO Constitution*, 2-3.

⁸ *ECO Constitution*, 13.

Elders and deacons are ordained and installed by the session. Pastors are ordained and installed by the presbyteries. Ordaining bodies must ensure that all officers adhere to the Essential Tenets of ECO. Failure of officers to continue to adhere to these standards is grounds for a session or presbytery to remove an officer from service according to the Rules of Discipline in this Constitution. (2.0101)⁹

Both of these show that our officers (elders, deacons, and pastors) as well as those who have “significant leadership roles,” such as high level staff, youth ministers, music ministers, etc. are to agree and adhere to our Essential Tenets. Furthermore, a decision to depart from adherence to the Essential Tenets is a decision precipitating a removal from leadership in an ECO congregation. This should not be viewed as a punitive act, or a decision of retribution, but rather acknowledging the reality of the confessional vow. If one promises to uphold the Essential Tenets in their vows to the congregation in ECO, then the violation of that vow, either through moral disobedience or theological dissent, is the action of choosing to voluntarily distance oneself from what binds ECO together in faith and life. Resignation or removal are the only options of integrity in these instances.

A distinction should be mentioned here, however. There is a difference between *failing* to live out the vows and *refusing* to live out the vows. For example, let’s look at the Essential Tenets’ elaboration of the sixth commandment: “6. eradicate a spirit of anger, resentment, callousness, violence, or bitterness, and instead cultivate a spirit of gentleness, kindness, peace, and love.”¹⁰ We may struggle with anger or resentment or bitterness in our lives, and having moments or even seasons of such behaviors or attitudes is not a disqualifying action in itself. To hold to the Essential Tenets while also struggling to live them out *holistically* is the continual process of the Holy Spirit’s role of sanctification in our lives. Repentance and recommitment are the appropriate courses of action. Yet, the justification of anger, or callousness or even violence is a refusal to live out the heart of the sixth commandment, particularly as Jesus defines it in the Sermon on the Mount.

This brings us to the question of Gender, Sex and the Kingdom of God. In Section E of our Essential Tenets - *Living in Obedience to the Word of*

⁹ ECO Constitution, 17.

¹⁰ ECO Constitution, 8.

God, the practice of “self-examination and confession” with respect to the seventh commandment calls us to:

7. maintain chastity in thought and deed, being faithful within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman as established by God at the creation or embracing a celibate life as established by Jesus in the new covenant;¹¹

The ordination vows themselves, with respect to our Essential Tenets, highlight both the personal commitment to live out the doctrine contained within it, as well as to support the doctrine among others in light of the church’s calling to mission and ministry in the world.

In terms of the personal practice of the leader, the examples of “thought and deed” are not difficult to name: a married person committing adultery, a single person cohabitating with a significant other, a person engaging in any type of sexual activity outside the bounds of marriage between a man and woman (including homosexual sex), an addiction to pornography, sexual misconduct of any form in the church or the workplace. These are to name but a few.

In terms of the support of the beliefs of the congregation and ECO, the examples could include posting online support of sexual lifestyles contrary to our doctrine, or dismissing the denomination’s stance on this issue while serving in leadership.

As mentioned before, the distinction between a struggle and a refusal comes to bear here. As sexual beings, the struggle with lust is one that will, in many cases, require continued diligence as a response to temptation. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:13, in direct response to sexual temptation - “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to [humankind]. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.” The Essential Tenets provide a way for us to hold each other accountable in how we live in response to the free justifying grace of Jesus Christ, received through faith.

Yet when that struggle translates into behavioral choices, then we have a problem. A pastor who has an affair with a congregant needs to enter a process

¹¹ *ECO Constitution*, 8.

of church discipline, stepping away from leadership for a period of time. A worship leader who refuses to stop cohabitating with a person not their spouse, regardless of their giftings, should be asked to step aside from leadership for a period of time. A potential elder who does not agree with the sexual ethics of our Essential Tenets or confessions, should not finish the process of discernment and election, unless a change of heart were to emerge.

To use the phrase “a period of time” is to acknowledge the possibility of repentance and restoration in the life of the church. Our polity allows for this very process. Yet we must acknowledge that there are a number of situations where this period may, in fact, be indefinite or terminal. Particularly in cases of sexual abuse, or egregious leadership abuse, such leaders may be subjected to a removal from a pastoral or officer role, potentially for the rest of their lives. The Essential Tenets as a document is both a description of *what* we believe and how we are to *live* what we believe. It is both theological content to be believed as well as a spiritual life to be lived in light of those beliefs.

We should be willing to engage in difficult and controversial debate within the church on various topics without denigrating others or shunning them in the process. An initial conversation related to the practical implications of this is being attempted by this book, and there will be, without question, debate over what is helpful or unhelpful, missional or theological. I myself have wrestled with these issues both on the pastoral level as well as the personal level. Open forums and conversations on issues such as those addressed by the document *Gender, Sex and the Kingdom*, can be particularly helpful for many struggling not only theologically but also on issues of application, evangelism, and keeping relationships healthy among family and friends.

Conclusion

For officers and leaders in the church connected and committed to ECO, one’s trinitarian confession, Scriptural commitment, and confessional adherence binds them to the truth that departures from our confessional understanding of God’s design for human sexuality should not be supported, or silently ignored, but lovingly corrected (Galatians 6:1-2), preferably by those connected, in community, with those struggling with these issues. Just as the question should be asked of pastors, officers, and leaders whether one can with good conscience serve on a leadership team, under the auspices of ECO, which affirms the gifts of both women and men - so the question must be asked to

our doctrine of human sexuality as contained in the Essential Tenets and the Confessional Standards of ECO. To say one agrees with and adheres to the Essential Tenets in order to serve the church as a leader, while contradicting that vow both within the life of the church as well as by witness to those outside our community, is to abandon the integrity of the vow itself.

Furthermore, church leadership teams that dissent from one another on this crucial issue likely have deeper theological disagreements that should be explored and resolved for the sake of unity of purpose and the making of disciples of Jesus Christ.

Hypocrisy: "All Sins are the Same" and "What about Divorce?"

Rev. Dr. GP Wagenfuhr

Sinful Equivocation

One of the most common lines we hear in evangelicalism, especially related to pointing out of hypocrisy is the belief that "all sins are the same." This represents a simplification of the Bible's understanding of sin so that a simplistic gospel presentation of Jesus as the solution to everything sells well. But it's both biblically and theologically false.

Biblically, the OT doesn't have one simple category for "sin" and the ritual forms of addressing various problems are quite different. Theft, for example, does not deserve death, but repayment with some extra. So, in the NT, we see Jesus also address certain kinds of people, particularly those who mislead or abuse children, as deserving a death by drowning,¹ something he certainly isn't saying to someone like Zacchaeus or the Samaritan woman.² 1 John makes this abundantly clear, "All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal."³

Theologically, the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms both address this question and I quote them at length to show what historical theologians thought to answer.

WSC Q.83. Are All transgressions of the law equally heinous?

A. Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.

WLC Q. 151. What are those aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others?

- A. Sins receive their aggravations,
1. From the persons offending: if they be of riper age, greater experience, or grace; eminent for profession, gifts, place, office, guides to others, and whose example is likely to be followed by others.
 2. From the parties offended: if immediately against God, his attributes, and worship; against Christ, and his grace: the Holy Spirit, his witness, and

¹ Mt 18:6; Mk 9:42; Lk 17:2.

² See Luke 19; John 4.

³ 1 Jn 5:16-17 NRSV.

workings; against superiors, eminent persons, and such as we stand especially related and engaged unto; against any of the saints, particularly weak brethren, the souls of them or any other; and the common good of all or many.

3. From the nature and quality of the offense: if it be against the express letter of the law, break many commandments, contain in it many sins: if not only conceived in the heart, but break forth in words and actions, scandalize others, and admit no reparation: if against means, mercies, judgments, light of nature, conviction of conscience, public or private admonition, censures of the church, civil punishments; and our prayers, purposes, promises, vows, covenants, and engagements to God or people: if done deliberately, willfully, presumptuously, impudently, boastingly, maliciously, frequently, obstinately, with light, continuance, or relapsing after repentance.

4. From circumstances of time, and place: if on the Lord's Day, or other times of divine worship; or immediately before, or after these, or other helps to prevent or remedy such miscarriages; if in public, or in the presence of others, who are thereby likely to be provoked or defiled.

These catechisms do show the same kind of legal wisdom that many courts would in determining the sentencing of a convicted offender. No judge simply applies law, because law can never be written with enough detail to cover every offense. The offense is not against the law, but against one another and against God.⁴

“What about Divorce”? Hypocrisy and Selective Judgment

The second common critique of the church speaking out about sexual sin is that churches are hypocritical if they accept divorce and thus selectively judge certain sins as worse. Jesus himself points out that hypocrisy is problematic, and that we should fix ourselves before we condemn others.⁵ Jesus even uses the very word “hypocrite” here.

Let's investigate this critique.

Firstly, there is truth that many church traditions consider divorce rather lightly compared to Jesus' own teachings. Jesus clearly states that divorce has one exception which is adultery.⁶ Now, adultery itself probably deserves a whole chapter treatment, given its rich imagery throughout Scripture and its connection to idolatry. Adultery is how the sin of Israel's idolatry is frequently

⁴ See Ps 51:4.

⁵ Mt 7:1-5.

⁶ Mt 5:31-32.

portrayed in the OT. This is because the sin of Israel is not about lawbreaking in itself. Lawbreaking is symptomatic of a deeper relational issue. Israel was not *for* God and the law would have no power to transform a “heart of stone” or a “stiff neck.”

Adultery thus represents two distinct things: sexual immorality and covenant unfaithfulness. Jesus indicates that the sin lies in the intention, not the commission of the act.⁷ That is, the sexual immorality is predicated on unfaithfulness to one’s promises and doing whatever it takes to remain true to one’s word, including cutting off a hand or gouging out an eye. Yet, mortals “look on the outward appearance” and “the LORD looks on the heart.”⁸ So we cannot judge intent very well, meaning that our normal practice is to judge quickly and based on acts and presentations.

It takes a lot of pastoral work to discern motives, to help one another work out the reasons why we sin in the ways we do. And yet, this is the means by which we move beyond hypocrisy and toward mutual aid in discipleship. This is likely a big part of the reason the wider Western church quit enforcing divorce prohibitions in the mid-20th century. Of course, that coincides perfectly with the opening up of divorce during that time.

Sexual immorality is indeed a sin according to the similar logic to homosexuality, incest, and bestiality in Leviticus. It is an “abomination.” So that a no-fault divorce that leads to remarriage counts as ongoing sexual immorality according to biblical logic. So, the adultery is a sin of covenant breaking, the dissolution of a relationship. A new *Christian* marriage shows that the divorced person wants to have divine affirmation of the relationship which God has not brought together. We might say that, from a secular perspective, marriage only matters in terms of property, taxation, inheritance anyway, so that divorce and remarriage only has these material implications. But from a theological point of view, remarriage is adultery because the divine recognition of a union is not formed or rescinded by human legal fictions. If God brought people together, then they cannot just choose a different arrangement.

Secondly, the issue is challenging from a gender perspective. The rise of divorce is also the fruit of the empowerment of women. And it is not the case that this is a modern innovation. Many cultures across space and time

⁷ Mt 5:28.

⁸ 1 Sam 16:7.

have allowed women to initiate divorce proceedings, so that the question of gender equity is not equivalent to modern conversations about gender identity. Thus, when it comes to the question of abuse, a rise in divorce isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Many interpreters would include abuse as a form of adultery, not just promiscuity. Paul's clear teaching about how a husband should treat a wife, by loving her as much as himself, and treating her body as well as his own, must be understood to convey a prohibition on domestic violence or abuse. The ability for women to divorce their husbands is often the sign of a society that is enabling women to escape abusive situations, rather than prioritizing the maintenance of a legal fiction. Abusive relationships are not real marriages from a Christian point of view, because they do not demonstrate the relationship Christ has with the church. And if we follow the logic of church discipline taught by both Jesus and Paul, and we hold that marriage is a symbol of Christ and the church, then it follows that marital discipline must involve separation and even divorce when abuse becomes the norm.

This complicates the issue because divorce is not simply a matter of sexual immorality. Divorce isn't the main problem, unfaithfulness and sexual immorality are two issues that converge in divorce.

Thirdly, the issue of selective judgment can certainly be valid, but it's worth unpacking why it might be the case. It is more than possible for whole peoples to have "seared consciences"⁹ and be entirely ignorant of their normalized sin. This is a general statement of the Gentiles in the Bible who were without the law, as Paul explores in Romans. Yet, it is also possible that, like the Israelites of Josiah's time, the book of the law was simply forgotten by neglect and a period of corporate confession and transformation was necessary. Are our churches in a place where divorce and remarriage is normalized because our culture has normalized this and we've gone along? This is not universally the case, and there are still many churches in which victims of domestic violence find the church to be a place where immense pressure is put on largely women to return to abusers in appalling examples of "cheap grace."

Fourthly, a more prevalent sin, statistically speaking, is pornography. Where divorce is not always sinful, there are no cases where intentional

⁹ 1 Tim 4:2.

pornography consumption represents a good, in spite of certain secular sources that represent sex workers and pornography as having justifiable places in therapeutic contexts. Jesus could not be clearer about gouging out eyes... Pornography is also an issue that needs much broader coverage. But we can say here that it is incredibly widespread, intentionally engineered into social media, socially damaging, and rarely discussed. Perhaps Christians don't want to be prudish or rehash the problems of the "purity culture" of the 90s. But the reality is that for the church to fight pornography it must do more than stigmatize it or make blanket statements about it. See our chapter on Eros and Agape for more, but from that chapter's logic, it would make sense that we need our churches to be communities and cultures in which the consumption of eros is actively fought against by valorizing and demonstrating agape.

To fight against pornography, then, we'll have to have a viable agapeic alternative to what people seek in this form of erotic consumption. And then, we'll need to pastorally address the issue with the normal forms of questioning that get at the heart of the matter. Why does someone desire pornography? What need or want is it trying to satisfy? How do we redirect that desire in a cooperative way?

But pornography is largely easy to ignore until it comes out that a trusted leader possesses it, often as part of a larger investigation into misdeeds. Gender and sexuality identity choices are usually public knowledge. The reasons for selective judgment or prosecution against LGBT people is simple... it's part of self-presentation and self-identification. It is easy to judge or exclude people who belong intentionally to a particular category.

The solution, it seems, in all of these cases is to suspend judgment, even of chosen identities, and create spaces where sin can be challenged with agapeic love. This involves positive work of crafting a culture of people who try to discern the heart rather than reading only appearances. It involves creating safe spaces where hard things can be discussed with trusted and trustworthy people. And it involves a coaching kind of mentality whereby the church is willing to work with people who want to change, rather than mandating change or shaming it from the pulpit.

Not all sins are equally heinous. Leaders and people in positions of trust bear greater responsibility. This also means that pastors should lead the way in being transparent about their own challenges. This doesn't mean sharing every detail, but normalizing a desire for change and the reality of

struggles with temptation. Leaders should also actively seek to produce different kinds of contexts where people do not feel shamed, judged, or that they must share, as well as contexts where going on to maturity is welcomed. There's no reason we couldn't talk about these kinds of things from the pulpit. There's no reason a program that interventions should only be normal for "addicts." It is feasible that we could develop small groups that candidly explore conversations in sexuality, gender, and challenges within all this.

The solution to hypocrisy is not just not judging others, it's also pulling out the plank from our own eye. That takes a lot of work from a leadership point of view in churches where Sunday worship attendance is the norm. The issue with all of these issues is that, hey, it's complicated—we're talking about individual people with individual stories, facilitating their meeting Jesus through a people who aim to represent his character as best they can. This is a high calling and a complex leadership task.

One ECO Pastor's Journey of Same-Sex Attraction

Rev. Charles Teixeira

First, let me say I am proud of my story, and not because it's a rather distinct one within evangelical circles, but because Christ has authored it to this point and will continue to until one day he perfects it. That said, I hope you will receive my story as I would receive yours- with grace, as a fellow sinner saved by a merciful God.

Before Christ

When I was 15, I came out as gay to my friends and family. All teens go through their own rollercoaster of working through who they are and what they're here for. I felt like that step was one giant leap toward trying to answer those questions. Of course, when I came out, things got easier in some ways - it was liberating to not have to hide that part of myself anymore - but I was surprised how much more difficult other areas of life became. I remember hearing homophobic jokes or slurs and finding my high school locker destroyed and my things ruined. While a weight was lifted off my shoulders, I walked those school hallways with the terrifying reality of an invisible target on my back.

Then came the headlines on the news. My home state of Massachusetts had become the first state to legalize gay marriage. Every news channel had round-the-clock coverage of riots outside the state capitol building. Christians had flocked to Boston holding all kinds of homemade signs ranging from "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" all the way to the sickening signs that Westboro Baptist had made (which I can't bear to repeat). It seemed like everywhere I turned, Christians only hated people like me. I found it repulsive and obsessive how they could travel across the country only to tell people like me that we couldn't one day be someone's spouse. For all the sexual misconduct in churches, stories that were still unraveling in the area, the irony of a Christian critiquing my own sexual ethic was unfathomable.

My resistance to Christianity didn't take root overnight. I grew up in the heart of New England just south of Boston where evangelical Christianity was almost nonexistent. I spent more time in Fenway Park than I did in any

church. My father had grown up in Venezuela, where he had witnessed churches financially manipulate families just trying to make sure they had enough to eat. I grew up inheriting my father's cynicism of Christians and their motives. By the time I became a teenager, the entire Boston area where was shattered by the revelation and aftermath of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Needless to say, long before I came out I didn't want Christians anywhere near me. Their reputation preceded them. All the posters and shouting I saw from the marriage protests only served to confirm things.

For most of my high school years, I didn't give Christians a second thought. I dove deeper into the LGBT community at my school and found it to be the sanctuary I was looking for. I cherished the welcome of other people who knew the rejection and hardship I had become accustomed to. I went on dates, had crushes, got nervous at school dances- just like any other teen. Things didn't get any easier, but they were eventually predictable enough to become manageable. My Junior year, though, something happened that I did not expect.

That winter, a friend named Andrew invited our baseball team to "camp." The truth is, I had no idea what I was being invited to. He told me that there was going to be music, good food, snowboarding- but somehow neglected to mention that this was a Christian retreat. He drove a friend and I there and when we finally arrived, I remember reading the sign at the entrance to the property, which read, "Monadnock Bible Conference." I felt duped. I was angry. I felt totally out of my element the whole weekend, sitting arms-crossed through what seemed like never-ending sermons and worship sets.

Nothing came of that weekend. I was abrasive and disruptive during every break-out conversation. I left feeling more bitter than ever towards Christians. Still, this same friend kept inviting me to church with him and his family. I had no idea at the time why he was so invitational when he knew I'd be so oppositional. But he kept inviting me. That's when I hatched a great idea: I didn't have to go alone. I sat front row in their small, colonial chapel of a church alongside him and his family. I went hand-in-hand with my boyfriend at the time. I had gone to cause an uproar and we did. In my eyes, it was just another way I was confirming what I had thought all along: Christian spoke a lot about "love" but they weren't willing to show it to people like me.

I found Church fascinating, though, even though I didn't agree with any of it. I kept going to church- just not inside it. I would walk the two miles

every Sunday, get there 10 minutes after the service had begun, stand outside the doors so I could listen in, and then leave early enough for no one to see me. Eventually, my father found out I was walking to church and would intercept me on my walk there. Afterall, the church wasn't a safe place in his eyes. After a few weeks, I just stopped trying.

New Life in Christ

That next year was a difficult one. Senior year of high school brought with it all the crushing anxiety of charting out your future after high school. On top of that, a break-up with a boyfriend had left me feeling so depressed that I began considering suicide. In the middle of that long, dark season, Andrew began inviting us to that year's winter camp. I was so down that I figured I had nothing to lose and, if nothing else, it would give me a change of scenery.

Something was different this second time at camp. I was at such a rock-bottom in life with so many unknowns that the good news they were offering actually sounded like good news. There weren't any big light shows or famous preachers. It was a man who spoke about how Jesus could restore our broken relationship with the Father followed by "Open the Eyes of My Heart" on piano. I can remember sitting in the hall as everyone around me was standing and worshipping, thinking, "What if this was all true?" I said a longshot kind of prayer to God, asking him to prove to me he was real and good. If he would do that in the next three days, I would give my life over to him.

When I returned home, I prayed every day for help with my anxiety and depression. It was as if the whole world suddenly calmed. I was overwhelmed by the surprise of it all- that God heard me and cared enough about my small life to work in it. He had proven Himself and three days later, I was ready to commit my life to the God I was getting to know. I sent out a message to all of my friends that day, telling them about my decision. I wasn't sure what it meant for how I live my life, I said, and I knew it would take me time to "figure it all out." Side note: Here I am, eighteen years later, still figuring it all out.

Andrew gave me a Bible out of one of his church's Sunday school rooms. I leaned heavily on the index at the back, not sure how to grapple with this massive, foreign book I'd been handed. I immediately read over all the

references to homosexuality. As I read Romans 1:18-32, I felt absolutely gutted. I felt like God had baited me with promises of his love only to surprise me with his utter disgust. I almost tore out the page altogether.

Filled with anger, I called Andrew and told him I think I had made a huge mistake becoming a Christian. How could God say that all homosexuals were also prone to all these other sins? The next day, Andrew invited me over for lunch with his parents. They patiently bore all my frustrations, criticisms, and questions and responded with both grace and truth. I sat in their living room crying, asking why God had put me in what seemed like an impossible ultimatum: live a life he wouldn't delight in or live a life that seemed inauthentic to who I was. I prayed relentlessly, asking God for a third way.

Still, God was drawing me deeper into my identity in him. Even as I wrestled with what to make of my sexuality, I also began meeting with Andrew's pastor about being baptized. I wanted to mark my decision to follow Jesus and call others to do the same, just like I had seen others do on Sunday mornings. The pastor brought my baptism request to the leaders of our church, who ultimately decided that until I repented of "acting out" my same-sex attraction they would not allow me to be baptized. I can remember watching others baptized on Sundays, tears falling and my finger nails pressing deeply into the sides of my thumbs. It felt painful, watching others rise out of the water with such joy and knowing I may never be allowed to experience it for myself.

I knew I had a decision to make: I would either have to be willing to follow Christ into the uncertainty of never dating or marrying or I would have to be willing to disregard aspects of following Christ's will for my life. In the end, I was more convinced of my need for Jesus than my need for romance. I surrendered my sexuality to Jesus not because he would love me any more but because he had already assured me of his love. I was determined to die to myself so I could live in him and live to the fullest, even if it was confusing or painful.

The next month, I was baptized. Andrew's father was the deacon assisting with the baptism. Robed in white, I was plunged beneath the cold water of a nearby lake. I wanted nothing more than to live for Christ and share the hope I'd found with others.

A few weeks later, I was beginning my freshman year at the University of Connecticut. I would curl up on one of the couches in the dorm lounge and read my Bible long after my roommate had gone to sleep. I wandered into a

Campus Crusade gathering on campus and, before I knew it, was going door-to-door sharing having faith conversations in the dorms. Even though I was enjoying my current track in studying psychology, I had never been so animated, so thrilled as I was getting a front row seat watching my peers come to know Jesus. I soon transferred to Gordon College so I could pursue career ministry.

That's when I met Elizabeth. I never had any intention to date again because I never thought I would be drawn to someone I could date and remain faithful to Christ. We went with friends to a salsa dancing club and I had no desire for another dance partner. We laughed at all our missteps together, established a lifelong affinity for salsa dancing, and took the first step toward what would be a beautiful, mysterious love for one another. God kept my sight on her and I've found her beautiful every day since that day. I had no intention of dating, never mind getting married, when I began college. Six months after our graduation, Elizabeth and I were married before God, friends, and family.

Same-sex attraction continues to be a part of my life and I've learned to not hide in the shame of that. It's taken me all these years to open up with others, especially men, and confidently share my background. The vulnerability and risk of rejection still terrifies me at times. I find myself longing for deep, covenant friendship with other men in a way that is rarely seen in the Church. Along the way, God has blessed me with strong men of faith to walk alongside me and help me establish a blueprint for the spiritual company of my brothers in Christ. I've sat at the feet of spiritual mentors, some of whom I'll never meet: Henri Nouwen, Sam Alberry, Wesley Hill, Rebecca McLaughlin, Bill Henson, and Preston Sprinkle.

I know that he who began this good work in me, which is so much more than just restoring aspects of my sexuality, will bring it to completion one day.

My Hope for ECO Pastors and Churches

As an ECO pastor with a personal connection to this conversation of gender and sexuality, I am honored to contribute to this publication. My hope for our churches and my fellow pastors is that we will strive to reflect Christ's love for people like me, those who have the immense probability of being wounded by others and are highly skeptical of Christ's love for them as they are. I would ask you to consider three things:

First, intentionally develop compassion for your LGBT neighbors though you may not understand them. Ask the Holy Spirit for eyes to see them through God's sight. Ask him to develop the same *splagchnizomai* for your LGBT neighbors that our Lord had for you. You will find it hard to recoil from them when you realize they are just like you: created by God in his image and in need of the cross and empty grave.

Second, practice the same radical, die-to-self discipleship of Jesus that you are willing to invite others into. It is an immeasurable commitment to follow Christ. No matter our backgrounds or particular areas of brokenness in our lives, the call remains the same: Die to yourself, pick up your cross, and follow Jesus. LGBT individuals invited to submit to Christ's lordship in all ways should be surrounded by a crowd of witnesses in their churches who have surrendered their own idols at the foot of the cross with equal abandon.

Lastly, repent of what you need to repent of. The Church can be a threatening place for our LBTQ neighbors. Many will never enter our churches because they've experienced hurt either inside of churches or outside of them. Too many Christians and Christian leaders have treated homosexual acts as an unequalled sin. We need to be willing to present to the world a determination to pursue sanctification from all sins and spend more time boldly declaring the grace of Christ's blood which covers each of them. May God give us the strength to do just that for his glory.

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