

The World Evangelical Alliance's Journal  
of Theology and Contemporary Application

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## Table of Contents

Editor's Introduction <i>page 195</i>	The Rejection of God's Natural Moral Law: Losing the Soul of Western Civilization <i>THOMAS K. JOHNSON</i> <i>page 243</i>
Image-Bearers for God: Does Biblical Language for Man Matter? <i>STEPHEN NOLL</i> <i>page 196</i>	Can Evangelicals Support Christian Zionism? <i>GERALD R. McDERMOTT</i> <i>page 253</i>
Can Followers of Christ Have Sexual Identities? <i>GREGORY COLES</i> <i>page 205</i>	Frangelism: Evangelizing by Storytelling <i>JOHANNES REIMER</i> <i>page 263</i>
Designed for Flourishing <i>JOSHUA STEELY</i> <i>page 217</i>	The Doxological Dimension of Ethics <i>THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER</i> <i>page 268</i>
The Emerging Church and Traditional Christian Understanding of Human Sexuality and the Family <i>KRISTINA PICKETT</i> <i>page 230</i>	Book Reviews <i>page 281</i>



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# **Evangelical Review of Theology**

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# Editor's Introduction: On Sex

Oh, did I get your attention? Well, the topic of sex, particularly issues of sexual identity and expression, has gotten a lot of Christians' attention recently. This themed issue on theological anthropology includes three strong papers on that topic.

But first, we are pleased to present an engaging essay by internationally prominent Anglican scholar Stephen Noll. In his typically witty but trenchant manner, he argues that switching to gender-inclusive language for people—not just for God—comes at a high theological price.

Next, Gregory Coles, author of *Singgle, Gay, Christian*, explains why affirming the sexual identity of gay, celibate believers is the right thing to do both biblically and pastorally. Baptist pastor Joshua Steely contributes an enlightening and well-argued defence of classical understandings of sexuality, grounded primarily in Genesis 1–2 but undergirded by broader biblical theology. Laywoman Kristina Pickett, who pursued a master's degree in theological studies after raising her children and did so well that her professors urged her to start publishing, provides an impassioned examination of where the evangelical church is failing in its teachings on sexual fidelity and what to do about it, against the background of progressive inroads like the Emerging Church.

The other four essays in this issue, though not directly tied to the theme,

are all significant and challenging. First, Gerald McDermott traces the history of Christian Zionism, pointing out that it dates back to the early church and is derived from plain interpretations of Scripture. Thomas K. Johnson pleads for a recovery of natural-law ethics as a way to build bridges to our neighbours who are not yet Christian believers and to restore the lost soul of Western civilization. Johannes Reimer succinctly presents a rationale and framework for every church and every individual Christian to engage in effective friendship evangelism. Thomas Schirrmacher's survey of perspectives on Christian ethics demonstrates the inextricable link between ethics and pursuing the honour and glory of God.

The first book review is actually a ninth article, as Schirrmacher, along with expressing appreciation for the first volume of published documents from the seventeenth-century Synod of Dordt, gives a fascinating, detailed summary of the history of the Synod, which had enormous implications for the future of Calvinism.

Themes for the next two issues are 'Engagement in the Public Space' and 'Theological Education'. See the call for papers on page 262.

I would love to hear your feedback or suggestions. Write to me at [bruce.barron0@gmail.com](mailto:bruce.barron0@gmail.com).

Happy reading!

—Bruce Barron, Editor

# Image-Bearers for God: Does Biblical Language for Man Matter?

Stephen Noll

On Ash Wednesday this year I attended my parish church and was marked by the priest with the sign of the cross, along with the words: *Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return*. As powerful as the symbolism of the act is, the words fell flat.

Or is it just me recalling the old wording: *Remember, O man, that thou art dust and to dust thou shalt return*? The priest pausing mid-sentence—‘O man’—and addressing each worshipper as ‘thou’, rather than gliding past with an indeterminate ‘you’. Each of these ‘thou’s’ shares a common humanity: all are *man*, heirs in sin of the one earthly father and heirs in Christ of the one Heavenly Father. But it had to go, because the sin and shame of ‘man’, so we are told, is actually the sin and shame of ‘mansplaining’.

Surely one can find a substitute for ‘O man’. *O person? O human? O differently gendered?* Failing that, just move on to *O-mit*. Hence the Anodyne Standard Version, which must be authoritative because it bears the im-

matur of the International Council on English Liturgies.

‘But the Millennials simply don’t get it!’ Well, if, as they say, praying shapes believing (*lex orandi, lex credendi*), it is equally true that believing shapes praying. And how shall they hear without a preacher? If ‘O man’ is so obviously scandalous in our day, would it really be too much for the priest to give an explanation when inviting the people to the altar rail? Perhaps, he might instruct them that bearing the name of Adam is of a piece with bearing the cross on one’s brow.

My goal in this essay is to make a case from Scripture for traditional language for man and for understanding how men and women, each in a particular way, are ‘image-bearers’ of God. In this whirlwind tour of the Bible, I shall focus on the foundational texts in Genesis, the gospels, and the letters of St. Paul.

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## I. Creation and Fall: From Man to Adam

We begin at the beginning with language for God and man: 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them' (Gen 1:27). Right at the outset, let's note: *grammatical gender and number do not always correspond to the referent*. This is true in all gendered languages. So in this verse, the one God of Israel ('*elohim*') is grammatically plural. In Hebrew, 'spirit' (*ruach*) can be grammatically feminine or masculine, and in Greek it is grammatically neuter (*pneuma*). It is also true that gendered nouns, pronouns, and verbs often *do* indicate how the referent is conceived.

'God created man in *his* own image.' God is uniformly indicated in both Testaments with masculine pronouns, as is the Spirit on occasion (Jn 4:24). Grammatical gender aside, the masculinity of God as revealed in Scripture is beyond dispute: the *Son* makes the *Father* known (Jn 1:18), and he is addressed by Jesus and the Holy Spirit as 'Abba, Father' (Lk 14:36; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). *The triune God, while not male* (Num 23:19), *is masculine*, and any attempt to imagine a gender-fluid deity is simply idolatrous.

Second, the Hebrew word for 'man' (*adam*) occurs grammatically *in the singular only*. There are no Adams nor Adamses in the Bible. Since the first chapter of Genesis is describing the different 'kinds' of God's creatures, it is proper, I think, to translate the word as 'man-kind'. Just as other verses in this chapter describe different creatures propagating 'according to their kind', so Genesis 1:27–28

specifies that mankind comes in two sexes, 'male and female', by which means they are commanded to 'increase and multiply' sexually.

Each of the creation narratives has a climactic moment. In Genesis 1, it is God creating mankind in his own image. In Genesis 2, it is the male recognizing his female counterpart. Yet Genesis 2 retains the use of the noun 'man' for the first human being: 'Then the Lord God formed the man (*ha-'adam*) of dust from the ground (*'adu-mah*) and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature' (Gen 2:7).

In this case, 'the *adam*' is both an individual male (Adam) and a generic type (Man). His nature is twofold, with an earthy body (note the Hebrew word-play between 'adam' and 'earth', similar to 'human' and 'humus') and a spiritual soul. As the narrative progresses, this solitary Man finds no counterpart in the animal world, so God 'builds' from his body 'the woman': 'Then the man (*ha-'adam*) said, "*She* ('this one') at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman (*ha-'ishah*), because she was taken out of man (*ha-'ish*)"' (Gen 2:23).

'Mankind' is now seen in terms of two interrelated sexes referred to with the Hebrew word pair '*ish* and '*ishah*, 'man and woman', 'husband and wife'. The next verse completes the story of Adam in search of a wife with this moral: 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh' (Gen 2:24). Man's nature is now perfected in the one-flesh union of husband and wife that will lead to the propagation of humankind. Despite this differentiation of the sexes, the Man contin-

ues to head the new family: 'And the man (*ha-'adam*) and *his wife* (*ha-'ishah*) were both naked and were not ashamed' (Gen 2:25).

This pattern of representation continues after the Fall. The Lord God calls the Man to account, saying, 'Where art *thou*?' God proceeds to judge each malefactor in the Fall individually, but the Man receives the final sentence of death on behalf of mankind—both sexes, present and future.

With the Fall, we see the morphing of the generic name 'Man' into the personal name Adam, which is complete by the end of chapter 4 (cf. 4:1 and 4:25). By chapter 5, Adam is clearly the personal patriarch of the human race:

This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him; Male and female created he them; and blessed them, and called their name Adam, in the day when they were created. (Genesis 5:1–2 KJV)

From now on, history will be patriarchal, with the passing on of the father's name to the next generation.

The establishment of patriarchy does not mean that the woman has no part to play in the ongoing human history. Just as God had formed the first man out of the dust so that he became an animate body, now Eve will become the 'mother of all living flesh' (Gen 3:20). Every 'son of man,' male and female, will be 'born of woman' (Job 14:1; Mt 11:11; 1 Cor 11:1–12). By subordinating her desire to her husband, she will bear earthly 'seed' who will ultimately trample on the Enemy (Gen 3:15–16).

## II. Jesus, Son of Adam, Son of God

The pattern of Genesis continues into the gospels. According to Matthew's genealogy, Jesus is the promised messianic Seed from Eve through a lineage of fathers, from Abraham and David to Joseph of Nazareth. Matthew highlights the promissory character of the Seed by adding the names of the irregular mothers Tamar, Rahab and Ruth, culminating in the Virgin Mary, Joseph's betrothed, 'of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ' (Mt 1:16).

According to Luke's genealogy, Jesus is 'son of Adam, son of God' (Lk 3:38). He is son of Adam through Eve, and Son of God through Mary. Jesus is very man and very God. Mary is his human mother, daughter of Eve. She is the virgin mother of Immanuel, who is conceived by the Holy Spirit. The Word is made man, not from the will of a human father but from God (cf. Jn 1:13).

The New Testament has two Greek words for *man*. The word *anēr* is generally used for a particular man; the word *anthrōpos* generally refers to mankind or a typical man (e.g. Lk 15:4). 'Son of man' is a synonym of 'man' in both the Old and New Testaments, with a special sense of the transitory lifespan of 'mortal man' (Job 25:6). Jesus frequently uses the title 'the Son of Man' in speaking of his own humiliation and exaltation (Mk 10:45; 13:46).

Beneath Jesus' usage of 'Son of Man' lie two key biblical texts: Psalm 8 and Daniel 7. The Psalmist ponders the mystery of God's favour in overreaching the angelic hierarchy and choosing mortal man as his royal covenant partner:



When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is *man* that you are mindful of him, and the *son of man* that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet. (Ps 8:3–6)

In Daniel's vision, he sees 'one like a son of man' enthroned by the Ancient of Days and given an everlasting dominion (Dan 7:9–14). As in Psalm 8, a mortal man is exalted to the throne of God. The author of the letter to the Hebrews resolves the mystery of humiliation and exaltation in the figure of Jesus' royal priesthood, 'crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone' (Heb 2:9).

The language of Christ's mediatorial Manhood appears also in Paul's testimony given to Timothy: 'For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men (*anthrōpoi*), the man (*anthrōpos*) Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all' (1 Tim 2:5–6). Not surprisingly, the modern revisers of the Nicene Creed broke the link in the traditional language that 'for us men and our salvation ... [Christ] was made man' by omitting 'men'.

### III. Jesus and the Brethren

It is unfortunate that *brethren* has fallen out of common usage and even out of modern Bible translations, because it captures a collective sense of the word *brother* that is inherent in the usage of Jesus and the apostolic

church. (Imagine a world without the word *children*.)

Whereas the Old Testament uses 'brothers' to indicate the entire people of Israel in a patrilineal sense—'your servants were twelve brothers, the sons of one man' (Gen 42:13)—Jesus overturns this understanding in a striking metaphor of family identity:

While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.' (Mt 12:46–50; cf. 19:29)

For rhetorical emphasis, Jesus speaks particularly of 'mother, brother, and sister', but elsewhere he speaks collectively: 'And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these *my brethren*, ye have done it unto me' (Mt 25:40 KJV). Actually, 'brethren' in this verse is not merely a collective plural but rather *corporate plural*, as Jesus is the invisible head of the needy body of brethren. To neglect or succour one brother is to do likewise to him. Jesus' usage was adopted by the apostles, who routinely addressed their fellow members of the body of Christ as 'brethren'.

### IV. St. Paul on Adam and Christ

St. Paul's recapitulation of biblical history in 'the light of the gospel of

the glory of Christ, who is the image of God' (2 Cor 4:4) takes him back to the beginning, to the first man (*anthrōpos*):

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. (Rom 5:12–15; cf. Eph 2:15–16)

Paul interprets the role of the first 'Adam' in two ways. There is the historical Adam, the first patriarch of the line to Moses and beyond; and then there is the prototypical man of Genesis 1–2. Although Paul likely understood the spread of sin as having a genetic basis, his primary reference to Adam is in the second role 'in that [or in whom] all men sinned', which clearly includes Adam and Eve, males and females, down through history. Similarly, he sees Jesus as the Second Adam, the 'one Man' through whom the grace of God abounded for many.

In his great chapter on the Resurrection, Paul makes clear that Jesus differs from the first Adam not simply in being a sinless man of dust, but in having a unique heavenly origin and destination:

Thus it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living being'; the

last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. (1 Cor 15:45–47)

The transformation of Jesus from the mortal to the immortal begins with his being born of a woman, a son of Adam; however, conceived by the Holy Spirit, he alone is empowered to become a life-giving spirit. Temporally, that transformation is completed with his death and resurrection: 'For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive' (1 Cor 15:21–22). For us, however, the transformation awaits fulfilment: 'Christ the first-fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ' (v. 23).

## V. Paul and the Image of God

Clearly the 'image of God' is a central tenet in Paul's teaching. The Son of God is, according to Paul, 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation' (Col 1:15). He is the divine prototype who, while in the form of God, put on the form of a servant and in the 'likeness of Man' humbled himself to death on a cross (Phil 2:5–8). Believers, while still in the flesh, share his risen glory in hope: 'Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven' (1 Cor 15:49).

In the above passages, Paul speaks generically of man (*anthrōpos*) in God's image, irrespective of sexual difference. In one passage, however, he does elaborate on how male and female sexes—the man and the woman—participate in the image. In ar-

guing that women in Corinth should wear a head covering in worship (1 Cor 11:2–16), Paul states, ‘I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of the woman is the man (*anēr*; the ESV translates ‘her husband’) and the head of Christ is God’ (11:3).

The operative word that distinguishes the divine persons and the human sexes is ‘head’ (Grk. *kephalē*). The head, as I interpret it, is the *representative member* or ‘icon’ of corporate identity. Christ is the Head or ‘icon’ of the new humanity, the Second Adam; the man (male) is the head or ‘icon’ of the human family. The Father is not an icon but the primal Source (another sense of *kephalē*), the ‘font of divinity’, from whom all things take their being (1 Cor 8:6).

Conflating Genesis 1 and 2, Paul makes the point that in the beginning there was only one ‘adam’ in God’s image:

For a man (*anēr*) ought not to cover his head, since he is the *image and glory of God*, but woman is the *glory of man*. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created [to reflect Christ’s glory] for woman, but woman [to reflect man’s glory] for man. (1 Cor 11:7–9 with my additions and emphases)

In this particular context, ‘image’ (Grk. *eikon*) *represents* and ‘glory’ *reflects*. The man is the image and glory of God because he heads the human family and reflects God’s glory in Christ publicly, before God and man (cf. Lk 12:8). The man represents the human race, whereas the woman, formed subsequently, reflects back and fulfils the man’s own ‘glory’ in the one-flesh union with him (*‘she now is flesh of my flesh’*).

Paul’s argument here may raise the question, for modern readers at least: ‘You mean women are not made in the image of God?’ I think Paul would reply, ‘I don’t care for the way you have phrased the question. Women and men both bear God’s image from the beginning, but each in a particular way.’ Women share in God’s image ‘in Adam’, in mankind, and through baptism in Christ, the Second Adam, who is the true image of God (Gal 3:28). Women reflect the glory of that image to their husband and bear that image through their children. This is what he does in effect say in verses 11 and 12:

In Christ, Woman is not complete without Man, nor is Man complete without Woman. For just as Woman reflects back to Man his primal image, so she bears his image physically through childbirth. So *Man and Woman are both image-bearers*; and all things are of God. (my paraphrase)

The delicate issue in Corinth has to do with how men and women, who bear God’s image equally but differently, interact when they step outside the family and into the assembled body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 14:34–35). Hence Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 11 is not some trivial defence of headgear but an application of his gospel, his first principles, his tradition—of human nature in the image of God in Christ (see verses 2 and 16).

## VI. Image-Bearers in Marriage

The way in which male and female ‘bear’ God’s image is not *mutual* in the sense of identical and interchangeable but *complementary* in the sense of distinctive and interconnected. (The

demeaning of the word ‘complementary’ today is itself a sign of the politicizing of language which this essay addresses.) With this terminology in mind, we now turn to Paul’s teaching on the relations of husband and wife. In Ephesians 5, as in 1 Corinthians 11, there is a ‘hierarchy’ of headship. The first half of the chapter concludes with thanks ‘to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’, which leads to the exhortation to ‘be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ’ (Eph 5:20–21). Mutual submission in Christ takes a particular form in the relations of wives and husbands:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband (*anēr*) is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. (Eph 5:22–24)

The Greek word translated ‘submit’ (*hupotassesthe*) means taking one’s place in the divine plan of creation and salvation. The married couple images Christ’s saving relationship to the church. The wife receives the man’s love and returns the glory of his image. The model of wifely submission is not childish or slavish obedience (cf. Eph 6:1–4) but the gracious humility of the Virgin Mary: ‘Be it unto me according to your word.’ Her role is that of the church submitting to Christ her Head, who is preparing her as a spotless Bride (v. 27).

Paul goes on at greater length to exhort husbands likewise to find their place in this order: ‘Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the wash-

ing with water through the word’ (Eph 4:25–26). The husband’s love is not worldly desire of the flesh but the perfect love of the divine Bridegroom: ‘You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you’ (Song 4:7). This is the costly love (*agapē*) that Christ demonstrated when he gave himself up for the Church. The mutual subjection of husband and wife out of reverence for Christ is, St. Paul claims, a profound mystery (Eph 5:32). The roles of husband and wife are distinct, fashioned on the created distinction of male and female yet conjoined in ‘imaging’ Jesus Christ and his church.

In this passage, Paul makes no reference to the bearing and rearing of children, but it is implicit in the instruction of children and the household that follows in chapter 6 (cf. Tit 2:3–5). The husband should aspire to be a provider and defender of his wife and children, but I am not sure that this captures his distinctive role as representative head of the family. At the climax of the traditional Anglican wedding service, the priest says, ‘I now pronounce that they be Man and Wife together in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ (recent revisions have substituted ‘husband and wife’). As ‘man’ the husband is to serve as Christ’s delegate on behalf of his family in the world.

Not so many years ago, a wife would identify herself as ‘Mrs. Adam Jones’, even after her husband had died. She did not consider this a case of being ‘owned’ by her husband or submerging her personality into his but being joined with him in one indissoluble unit—‘Man and Wife together’. She bore his name with honour, as did the children she bore to him, just as he and she together with

their children bore their baptismal names in the name of the triune God. Names matter, to God and to us.

One could, I suppose, caricature the image of husband and wife in terms of a knight in shining armour and a damsel in distress. That is not Paul's view. For Paul, *all* Christians are to put on the whole armour of God (Eph 6:11–20), which includes a kind of female militancy ('archery' in *Narnia*). Instances abound: the prostitute who gives false testimony to save her son (1 Kings 3:16–27); the mother who encourages her seven sons to die nobly for God's Law (2 Maccabees 7:20–23); the prayer warriors like Anna 'worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day' (Lk 2:37); and Helena and Monica, praying for their sons' conversion. The church has had its female monastics and martyrs, who have been honoured for their single-minded devotion to the Bridegroom.

Indeed, the church herself is represented as a woman whose Son crushes the Dragon's head (Rev 12:1–6). Men and women together are called to be contending churchmen, sisters of the elect lady (2 Jn 1, 13). For this reason, according to the Book of Common Prayer, babies (both male and female) are marked with the sign of the cross, with the pledge that they 'shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and *manfully* to fight under his banner against sin, the world and the devil' (emphasis added).

The Anglican martyr Hugh Latimer is said to have encouraged his fellow martyr Nicholas Ridley with the words, 'Play the man, Master Ridley!' I know this advice goes utterly contrary to the spirit of our age, but I would say to young men and husbands today: 'Play the man, gentlemen, in your

family and in the church and world, and in so doing honour your wife and children!' I would also say this to young women and wives: 'Play the man, ladies! Don't disown your manhood! You were created in Adam, just as you are reborn in Christ. Submit to Christ as your Head! Submit to the headship of your husband, even when that requires the patient courage of the martyrs.' (Such courage means that in situations of death or abuse, a widow or a wife may have to play the role of head of household.)

## VII. Remember, O Man, the Language of Scripture

This essay began as an examination of liturgical language for man and proceeded to examine key texts from the Bible. I have argued that the corporate or representative sense of masculine nouns and pronouns is not an indifferent matter.

In a little treatise on *The Language of Canaan and the Grammar of Feminism* (Eerdmans, 1982), Vernard Eller comments on language for the 'representative individual':

'My readers' is an idea totally different from 'my reader'. 'My readers' are a statistic; 'my reader' is a person. The Bible, of course, could not even get its message off the ground without using this representative individual device—largely, I suppose, because of its profound commitment to the 'man' anthropology. (page 16)

He continues by pointing out a second necessary quality of the representative language, its *communal* dimension:

Undoubtedly the Bible also uses [this device] to underline its own

understanding of the nature and importance of community. Often these representational figures are as much challenges to an ideal as they are descriptions of what actually obtains.

Finally, he notes that the Bible's use of generic masculine pronouns allows it to avoid the distraction of dual genders in order to highlight the *corporate*, and in this case feminine, character of the church:

Thus the church is to be feminine in relation to what? To the masculinity of God (or Christ), of course. And the relationship is just as essential the other way around: the masculinity of God has no meaning at all unless there is a femininity toward which it can act 'masculinely' (page 17).

As a striking example of the corporate feminine, consider this famous hymn:

The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;  
She is his new creation, by water and the Word;  
From heav'n he came and sought her to be his holy bride;  
With his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died.

Try substituting 'it' for 'she'. It dies.

So far as I can see, Eller's arguments were never engaged, even by

evangelicals, who made the pragmatic decision to limit the fight to inclusive language for God. I was in that camp. In retrospect, I think that was a mistake. By surrendering to the designer usage of 'he or she', then 'she or he', then 's/he', then 'they' (sing.), and finally 'zhe', we opened ourselves to the next questions: 'How can I relate to a Father God and a male Saviour?' and 'If grammatical gender is an indifferent matter, what about gender more generally?' All fifty-seven varieties.

Is it possible to revert to the usage of yore (*yore* itself being about fifty years back)? Let me put it this way: does biblical language for man in the image of God matter? If it is a matter of fidelity to God's Word, then how can we *not* uphold the faith of our fathers and their language of worship?

If the language of Scripture and worship is a mirror of the soul, then it is as image-bearers of God in Christ that we find our true selves. Going back to my opening illustration, if the mark of ashes on the forehead is also a mark of the promised seal of salvation (Rev 7:3), how can we not welcome the companion words as well? If with the church we men of dust await the consummation of her vision glorious—if the right Man on our side, the second Adam to the fight, is Jesus—I can sing to that!

# Can Followers of Christ Have Sexual Identities?

Gregory Coles

In the house where I grew up, on a bookshelf in the middle of the upstairs hall, my parents kept three or four books for Christian young men learning to respond to sexual temptation with integrity. When the chimes of my biological clock began announcing puberty, I made my dutiful pilgrimage to that bookshelf.

From those books, I learned that Christian young men needed to reckon honestly with the reality of our sexuality. We needed to be cautious of where we let our eyes linger and avoid situations that exacerbated temptation. We needed to be open with one another and hold one another accountable. Instead of feeling shame and self-hatred when we experienced arousal or attraction, we needed to submit our involuntary impulses to the lordship of Jesus, choosing not to fantasize about or pursue sexual gratification outside the covenant of marriage.

All this might have been decent advice for a boy my age, if it had been written for me. But it wasn't written for me. It was written for the kind of boys whom today's parlance calls 'straight'—boys whose involuntary arousal and attraction were triggered by women (and only by women). *These* boys were the ones called to openness and honesty, the ones who

needed to name and acknowledge their sexuality in order to guard wisely against its temptations and learn to steward it well. *These* boys were the ones whose shame could be supplanted by a vocation of obedience.

For me—a young man attracted to other men, and not to women in the slightest—the shame had no such reprieve.

When I began, more than a decade later, to publicly call myself a 'celibate gay Christian', I was motivated in part by a desire to see the wisest insights of those old books extended to boys like me. I hoped that those of us whose experience of sexuality looked different from most of our peers' experiences might still find guidance, hope, encouragement toward holiness and freedom from shame within the family of God.

Adopting the word *gay* was not, for me, an attempt to declare a totalizing new identity which superseded my identity as a follower of Christ. It was simply an attempt to communicate as honestly as I could to as many people as possible. Along with many other same-sex-oriented Christians, I have found that words like *gay*, *lesbian* and *bisexual*—words collectively known as sexual identity labels—can facilitate important conversations about vocation and obedience to Jesus for

those of us with non-normative experiences of sexuality.

In many evangelical spaces, however, to refer to oneself as gay while continuing to uphold the historic Christian sexual ethic is to court controversy. Critics of sexual identity language worry that, by adopting such language, people like me accord too high and too fixed a status to our sexuality. For these critics, naming sexual identity and asserting the likely permanence of sexual orientation in this lifetime signal the adoption of unbiblical anthropological categories which blunt the keenness of our devotion to Christ. Far better, the critics argue, for us to name our sexuality only in terms and categories drawn directly from the Bible.

This essay considers how biblical anthropology should inform and delimit the evangelical Christian debate over sexual identity. First, I lay out some of the most prominent objections to sexual identity categories and language, examining the underlying claims about biblical anthropology which motivate these objections. Second, I turn to the question of grammatical ontology, proposing that the categories of identity and being do not function as monolithic in the biblical texts. Third, I suggest how sexual identity labels equip us to grapple pragmatically with the current postlapsarian state of all humanity, as well as how such labels might catalyse anthropological investigation which limns the goodness of God's original design. Finally, I caution against over-extensions of biblical anthropology which seek to extract from the Bible answers to questions the Bible does not intend to answer.

In defending sexual identity language, I am not insisting that all who

experience some degree of attraction to the same sex *must* describe themselves with such language. Rather, I simply wish to demonstrate that those of us who do find sexual identity labels helpful *can* indeed use them without altering our cardinal identity as followers of Jesus. By recognizing the linguistic latitude that exists for Christians in the realm of sexual identity, evangelicals can avoid placing unnecessary burdens and strictures on same-sex-oriented people seeking to follow Jesus.

## I. Understanding Opposition to Sexual Identity

Criticisms of the term *gay* (and comparable terms like *lesbian*, *bisexual* and *queer*) as applied to Christians with a historic Christian sexual ethic can be (and have been) levelled at a variety of registers. However, the specific criticism with which we are here concerned centres on the notion of identity. Rosaria Butterfield states the case succinctly: 'You cannot have union with Christ if you have made an identity out of anything else, including your sexuality.' Butterfield argues that the demands of Christian identity are so total that they require disidentification from any other competing identity. The verbal acknowledgment of any sexual identity recognized by modern categories of sexual orientation is, she argues, an extra-biblical nomenclature that thereby contradicts biblical conceptions of sexuality. She concludes, 'Sexual identity is incompatible with union with Christ.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rosaria Butterfield, 'Why "Celibate Gay Christianity" Is Not Reformed and Biblical



Various forms of Butterfield's argument have been echoed by a number of prominent evangelical leaders—especially those who hail from Reformed traditions—including Albert Mohler, Owen Strachan, Christopher Yuan and Denny Burk. Both Mohler and Strachan root their objections in 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.

The fundamental flaw with identifying oneself as gay is, Mohler asserts, 'the idea that any believer can claim identity with a pattern of sexual attraction that is itself sinful. The Apostle Paul answers this question definitively' (in 1 Corinthians 6).<sup>2</sup> Strachan extends the same argument further:

Paul views the Corinthians as having broken decisively with their old identity and practice. They *were* thieves, but are not any

longer. They *were* drunkards, but are not any longer. They *were* homosexuals (whether the *mala-koi* or the *arsenokoitai*, the passive or active homosexual partner, respectively, according to the Greek) but are not any longer.<sup>3</sup>

Though Strachan makes a distinction between sexual identity and sexual practice, he argues that both gay identity and same-sex sexual behaviour are equally forbidden by Paul's words. For Strachan, the shift Paul commends to his readers is as much a shift in self-conception as it is a shift in behaviours or lusts. 'If ever there was an opportunity for Paul to allow a group of sinners to hold onto their fallen identity, it was the Corinthian church. But Paul did not encourage the Corinthians—former swindlers, idol-worshippers, homosexuals, and fornicators—to do this. He taught them gospel-driven Christianity. He taught them new-nature Christianity.'<sup>4</sup>

This new-nature Christianity, Strachan argues, leaves no room for a self-understanding of persistent same-sex orientation. It does, he concedes, leave room for people to continue experiencing certain patterns of temptation, but he maintains that such patterns must not be reified in the form of sexual identity. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that identity is the linchpin of Paul's vision of holiness:

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Christianity: Understanding the Vocabulary and Theology Behind the New "Gay Christian" Movement', 31 July 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVjj\\_dDAXLA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVjj_dDAXLA).

2 Albert Mohler, 'Torn Between Two Cultures? Revoice, LGBT Identity, and Biblical Christianity', 2 August 2018, <https://albertmohler.com/2018/08/02/torn-two-cultures-revoice-lgbt-identity-biblical-christianity/>.

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3 Strachan, 'On the Revoice Conference, "Gay Christianity", and the Apostle Paul's Showstopper Words to the Corinthians', 1 June 2018, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/thoughtlife/2018/06/on-revoice-gay-christianity-and-the-apostle-pauls-showstopper-words-to-the-corinthians/>.

4 Strachan, 'On the Revoice Conference'.

The key plank in the New Testament doctrine of sanctification is *identity*. ... There are Christians who are fighting all sorts of sinful attractions and temptations—this, in fact, is all of us. But there is no such thing as gay Christianity. There can be no connection between Christ and Satan, the flesh and the Spirit, the church and the world. If we teach that there is, we dishonor, disobey, and even silence the words of the apostle Paul to the Corinthians.<sup>5</sup>

That Strachan's argument depicts the whole experience of being gay as always and only sinful should not be missed. Indeed, when critics of sexual identity language lay out their alternative proposal for the categorization of same-sex sexuality, using the categories available within their biblical anthropology, they almost unanimously place it within the category of 'sin'. On these grounds, Christopher Yuan argues that all talk of 'sexual orientation' among Christians ought to be exchanged for talk of sin and sanctification:

When there's a choice between a biblical framework and a secular one, should not Christians favor the biblical over the secular? And might God's word provide us a better framework for understanding the capacity to experience unchosen and persistent sexual and romantic desires toward the same sex?

Yes, it does. That framework is called *sin*.<sup>6</sup>

Yuan is quick to clarify that the sin of same-sex attraction is not 'actual sin' but 'original sin'. A person is therefore not morally culpable, he argues, for simply experiencing the capacity for same-sex sexual temptation. Yet this capacity is nonetheless sinful because of its etiology in the Fall, and Christians must therefore seek to distance themselves from it and refuse to identify with it.

All these arguments share a resistance to nomenclatures developed from anthropological sources other than the Bible. Secular anthropological divisions are regarded as irreparably infected by the secular worldviews of those who developed them; as Butterfield writes, 'Words, like kitchen washrags, carry and distribute history (and bacteria) with each use, and the category-invention of sexual orientation brings much bacteria with it.'<sup>7</sup> Thus, Denny Burk argues, 'If there is to be a recovery and renewal of Christian conscience on sexuality issues, secular identity theories must give way to God's design as revealed in nature and scripture.'<sup>8</sup> For these critics, a biblical response to non-normative experiences of sexuality can be achieved only by rejecting all talk of sexual orientation, sexual identity, or any other anthropological nomenclature extrabiblically derived.

I share some of the theological and pastoral commitments that motivate the concerns of these critics. To the degree that any self-understanding

5 Strachan, 'On the Revoice Conference'.

6 Yuan, 'Is Anyone Born Gay?' 8 September 2018, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/is-anyone-born-gay>.

7 Rosaria Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity and Union with Christ* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant, 2015), 96.

8 Burk, book review of *Single, Gay, Christian*, 11 October 2017, <http://www.dennyburk.com/book-review-of-single-gay-christian/>.

or identity exists in competition with our identity in Christ, I agree that Christians must flee from it. To the degree that any linguistic frame invokes a logic irredeemably contradictory to biblical truth, I agree that this linguistic frame must be abandoned.

Yet the claim that sexual identity language inevitably leads into such errors—or that the avoidance of sexual identity language inoculates a person against such errors—is neither biblically nor linguistically sound.

## II. The Grammatical Ontology of Identity

In Galatians 3:26–28, Paul offers a compelling account of the all-consuming identity found in Christ: ‘So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’ The supremacy of the finished work of Christ, as received through baptism into his body, so outstrips every other differentiating identity that it renders those identities comparatively meaningless.

Some readers of Paul’s words in Galatians 3 have taken them as a prohibition of any self-identification with racial difference in the body of Christ. After all, in its most literal grammatical sense, Paul does indeed declare an ontological negation of racial difference, as well as social difference and sex difference.<sup>9</sup> Verse 28 uses a

contracted form of the Greek copula (from which our English word *ontology* is derived) in each identity pairing it negates. To carry this argument to its logical conclusion, however, would suggest that Paul also wishes to prohibit Christians’ self-identification with their male or female sex,<sup>10</sup> an implication which those who wish to avoid discussion of Christian racial difference are rarely keen to consider.

To read Galatians 3 as a prohibition of all linguistic identity categories other than Christian identity is, moreover, to read Paul in contradiction to his own corpus. Had Paul intended to forbid the linguistic identification of Christians within racial categories, then his confrontation of Peter recounted in the previous chapter of Galatians would have been hypocritical for its grammatically ontological naming of racial identity: ‘You are a Jew’ (Gal 2:14).<sup>11</sup> Had Paul intended to forbid the linguistic identification of slaves and free people with their social status and of men and women

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‘nor is there male *kai* female’ may indicate that the identity at issue here is not sex *per se* but marital status, since the same Greek phrase *arsen kai thēlu* also appears in Jesus’ quotation of the Genesis creation account (Mt 19:4; Mk 10:6) in a conversation about the nature of marriage. The first Septuagint use of the phrase *arsen kai thēlu*, however, appears as an elaboration of the manner in which God created humankind in his image (Gen 1:27) and does seem concerned primarily with sex difference rather than marital union. Regardless of whether Paul has sex difference or marital status primarily in mind, the broader point about Paul’s treatment of identity remains unchanged.

**10** Or, perhaps, with their marital status, as *per* the above footnote.

**11** Observe the appearance of the copula ‘are’ (Greek *ei*) here.

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**9** Paul’s shift from *oude* separating the nouns in the constructions ‘neither Jew *oude* Gentile’ and ‘neither slave *oude* free’ to *kai* in

with their sexes, his status-specific and sex-specific statements in Ephesians 5 and 6 would likewise be verboten. For Paul, it seems, obedience to Jesus must at times be negotiated precisely through the lens of a believer's various other identities, in order to reckon well with how those identities ought rightly to inform and be informed by the believer's overarching identity in Christ.

What Paul's statement in Galatians 3, read alongside the acknowledgements of identity throughout his epistles, demonstrates so well is the reality that the secondary identities of the Christian—national identities, racial identities, gender identities, and so forth—must be at times either deemphasized or reemphasized according to situational need.<sup>12</sup> When too great a focus on identity difference inhibits Christian unity (especially when it serves as a rationale for inequality), Paul uses the language of ontological negation to reinstate the supremacy of identity in Christ. When failure to acknowledge identity difference results in a failure to manifest Christ within a person's particular vocation, Paul uses the language of ontological affirmation to show the continuing relevance of lived diversity within the body of Christ.

Notably, both Paul's deemphasis and his reemphasis of identity are made in grammatically ontological ways, insofar as they involve use of the copula and make claims about 'being'. For Paul, 'You are a Jew' and 'there is no Jew' are statements that must exist in tension rather than in

contradiction. The grammatical ontology of identity does not contradict its opposites. Both negation and affirmation of identity are rooted in real and necessary spiritual realities.<sup>13</sup> To claim, then, as critics of sexual identity language have sometimes claimed, that the adoption of any identity beyond identity in Christ signals an obvious supplanting of Christian identity is to take a different approach to the language of identity from the one taken by the apostle Paul.

The utility of identity categories persists even when these categories include certain likely temptations towards or expressions of sinfulness. The category of 'Gentile' in Paul's day was typically marked by a neglect of service to the one true God, signalling possible proximity to a host of temptations. Yet Paul insisted that abandonment of Gentile identity was not a prerequisite for obedience to Jesus. Even today, categories of racial and national identity bring with them a vulnerability to certain temptations; one need only think of how often phrases like 'American Christian' shift from a plain statement of nationality to an assertion of idolatrous nationalism. Yet the potential for idolatry should not thereby inhibit American citizens, or anyone, from naming their nationality.

For several reasons (some of which I discuss below), I push back against the claims by critics of sexual identity language that the experiential state named by words like *gay* and *lesbi-*

<sup>12</sup> We might add, too, that Paul's simultaneous identification with and disidentification from several of his own identities is modeled in Philippians 3:4–11.

<sup>13</sup> Regarding the objection that linguistic or grammatical opposites always indicate conceptual contradictions and therefore cannot exist in the Bible, note Proverbs 26:4–5, in which the reader is called both not to answer and to answer a fool.

*an* is best recategorized as sin, even nonculpable original sin. But insofar as *gay* does indeed name a set of capacities to be tempted towards certain forms of sinfulness (just as the often unnamed 'straight' orientation carries a different set of capacities toward sinfulness), I would maintain that the acknowledgement of these capacities is part and parcel of our capacity to live wisely and receive grace in the midst of them.

Those who describe ourselves with the language of sexual identity while remaining committed to the historic Christian sexual ethic are not seeking by this linguistic identity statement to displace the primacy of Christian identity. Indeed, as Johanna Finegan observes, 'If you are living in obedience to biblical teaching, abstaining from the sexual and romantic relationships you most desire ... there is no serious debate to be had over which is more central to who you are, your faith or your sexuality.'<sup>14</sup> Rather, in making grammatically ontological statements like 'I am gay', Christians like Finegan and me are seeking to do the same identity work we see exemplified in Scripture, naming with complete honesty our experience of the world in order to best encounter Christ within that experience.

### III. Acknowledging Postlapsarian Reality

I agree with the critics of sexual identity language that one component of same-sex orientation is clearly fallen

and postlapsarian in nature. I disagree that this component necessarily represents the whole of same-sex orientation, as I will discuss in the next section. I likewise disagree that the postlapsarian component of same-sex orientation ought to be classified as sin when it represents neither chosen lust nor physical sexual behaviour, nor even an active experience of temptation, but only the *capacity* to experience temptation. To name the capacity to experience temptation as itself categorical sin seems incongruous with the Bible's clarity that Jesus himself was 'tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin' (Heb 4:15). Burk argues that the temptation of Jesus was of an altogether different kind from the temptation which he classifies as sinful:

In the wilderness temptation, the enticement to sin came from Satan, not from Jesus. And that is why Jesus was able to be tempted and yet be without sin (Heb. 4:15). But when the enticement to sin emerges from our own sinful nature, that is an entirely different matter. In that case, the temptation *itself* is sinful. That is an experience that is unique to sinners and that Jesus himself never experienced.<sup>15</sup>

Burk's omission, in his paraphrase of Hebrews 4:15, of the words which emphasize the similarity of Jesus' temptation to that of his followers—'in every way, just as we are'—is perhaps telling. For Burk's argument to hold, Jesus must in fact be tempted only in some ways, not precisely as we are. Nate Collins and I have respond-

<sup>14</sup> Finegan, 'Spiritual Friendship Pre-Conference: Johanna Finegan', 1 August 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FG0fev-WtQE>.

<sup>15</sup> Burk, 'Is Temptation Sinful?' 11 July 2018, <http://www.dennyburk.com/is-temptation-sinful/>.

ed to Burk's theology of temptation-as-sin at some length,<sup>16</sup> so I will not rehearse those arguments here. For the present conversation, however, the claims of Burk and Yuan that the capacity to experience same-sex sexual temptation is itself already a form of sin need not be overturned. Even if such an argument were granted, it would not thereby negate the potential value of sexual identity language for truthfully communicating postlapsarian reality.

Evangelical books for young men wishing to foster sexual purity, like the books I read as a pubescent bookshelf-lurker, tend to be united in their suggestion that men must deal openly and honestly with the temptations they experience, confess moments of failure, and set realistic boundaries so as to not expose themselves to unnecessary temptation. Though the conversations within these books usually assume heterosexual orientation, similar principles apply equally for those attracted to the same sex. Just as straight men's isolation tends to lead to unwise choices in the realm of sexuality, so too does gay men's isolation. Just as straight men would be wise to exercise caution in encounters with scantily clad women, so gay men would be wise to exercise caution in encounters with scantily clad men. Openness and thoughtful reckoning with temptation require some form of linguistic identification, regardless of whether the words we choose are sexual identity labels.

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16 Nate Collins and Gregory Coles, 'Is Same-Sex Attraction (or 'Being Gay') a Sin?' *Center for Faith, Sexuality & Gender*, n.d., <https://www.centerforfaith.com/resources/pastoral-papers/03-is-same-sex-attraction-or-being-gay-a-sin>.

Once we have acknowledged that living honestly in a postlapsarian world requires some kind of linguistic acknowledgement of our own capacities for sinfulness, the case against using the word *gay* becomes somewhat murkier. If indeed same-sex-oriented people's mission is to find a word which adequately expresses their capacity for sinfulness, so that they can respond wisely to and take precautions in recognition of that capacity, *gay* seems well suited to perform that work. The objection that *gay* too plainly implicates a capacity for sinfulness makes little sense as a rebuttal here, since the risk of potential temptation is precisely the thing being named. Expunging the word from our vocabulary does not change the fact that we live in a postlapsarian world where some of us do indeed experience attraction to the same sex. As Finegan rightly quips, 'In general, outside of Christian circles, the refusal to use the word "gay" to refer to those who are predominantly attracted to their own sex is a refusal to speak English.'<sup>17</sup> If we lose the ability to name our sexuality, we don't lose our capacity for temptation, but we may lose our ability to think clearly about how to live wisely in light of that reality.

#### IV. Imagining Prelapsarian Intent

Even if the term *gay* and other sexual identity labels were to refer exclusively to the capacity to experience certain forms of temptation, I would maintain that they are communica-

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17 Finegan, 'Spiritual Friendship Pre-Conference'.

tively useful terms. In addition, however, I hold that acknowledging and naming current experiences of sexuality equips us not only to live wisely despite our ongoing capacity for temptation but also to discern the aspects of our experience which reflect the goodness of God's original design.

To be clear, I am not claiming that the capacity to experience sexual desire for the same sex—which is certainly a significant component of what we might call 'gay orientation'—is part of God's prelapsarian intent for humanity. Neither is the capacity to experience sexual desire for the opposite sex outside the covenant of marriage, even though that is likewise a significant component of what we might call 'straight orientation'. Indeed, to try through the lens of current human understanding and current human language to characterize the totality of God's design for human sexuality is always an anachronistic enterprise, insofar as we take words tainted by the impact of the Fall and seek to apply them to a world where the Fall has not yet occurred. To say that any sexual orientation existed before the Fall is to superimpose the brokenness of our current state back onto the wholeness of our original design.

Yet the brokenness introduced by the Fall undoubtedly touches people in different ways. Some people's pride tends to manifest in legalistic rule-following and judgmentalism, whereas others tend toward rebellion and rule-breaking. Some are predisposed towards bearing false witness in their eagerness to make everyone happy; others eagerly speak the unpleasant truth but lack an impulse towards kindness. Extroverts face different struggles than introverts, and staid

logical thinkers face different struggles than creatively unsystematic thinkers. No disposition is immune to brokenness, but not every disposition shares identical impulses towards brokenness.

Every broken disposition likewise represents an invitation to redemption. And just as the bent towards brokenness differs, so too the gifting and disposition of the redeemed person may differ. The extrovert who is easily tempted into performance mentality and reliance on other people's affirmation need not become a hermit when she is transformed by the gospel. By the same token, the introvert who repents of his general lack of love for people need not become a socialite to evince his transformation.

The naming of dispositional categories, in these cases, becomes a strategy not only for addressing the sins that are most tempting within a given disposition but also for pursuing the likely glories that await the obedient follower of Jesus within that disposition. Such dispositional identities need not be named by the Bible or traditionally included within biblical anthropology to offer potential illumination to followers of Jesus.

Take extroversion and introversion as examples. There is no direct biblical teaching on such categories of personality identity. The question of whether extroverts and introverts existed before the Fall—whether different levels of inclination to be energized by human interaction represent categorical creational differences or some complex cocktail of nurture in a postlapsarian world—can only be speculated upon, not answered definitively using available biblical evidence about the prelapsarian world. Even so, there can be great wisdom

in learning to identify personality dispositions so that we can purposefully consider how those dispositions might manifest themselves either in rebellion or in obedience to God.

In one sense, the utility of sexual identity is not far removed from the utility of other dispositional identities. The dispositions which I call ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ are both, as we have established above, manifestations of a broken postlapsarian existence. But they also both represent certain capacities toward particular avenues of holiness. For example, as a gay person with an exclusively homosexual orientation, I experience absolutely no capacity for temptation to lust after women. For myself and many other celibate gay men I know, this component of our sexuality has been at times a source of great shame, not least because it has seemed to reaffirm our calling to celibacy in an evangelical context where celibacy is rarely prized. But I have increasingly come to regard this lack of impulse towards heterosexual sinfulness—a defining component of my sense of gay identity—as a gift. Those who would understand same-sex orientation as an exclusively sinful experience seem unaware that the capacity for opposite-sex lust represents a form of postlapsarian brokenness from which exclusively same-sex oriented people like myself have been spared.

A reasoned and pastoral approach to sexuality must distinguish sinful or potentially temptation-inducing components of gay orientation from components which are not necessarily products of fallenness and may indeed reflect God’s creative intention. The goal of such moral distinctions is not, as critics of sexual identity have suggested, an attempt to deny or eu-

logize temptation and sin. Rather, the value of these distinctions lies in their removal of condemnation and shame that have taken root where God may intend his children to take delight—just as I, for example, have learned to delight in the ease with which I think of my sisters in Christ ‘as sisters, with absolute purity’ (1 Tim 5:2) and experience not even a hint of temptation to sexually objectify them. Matthew Lee Anderson puts the case for such moral distinctions well:

The point of drawing the relevant distinctions is *not* to assure people that their sin is ‘not as bad’ as they believed, but to help them *discern what their sin is—and is not*. It is possible to distort God’s grace by using it to defend a cheap leniency, which obscures the comprehensive and incomprehensible weight of His holiness. Yet it is also possible to distort it by discovering sins *where they are not*, so that the extent of His forgiveness is falsely magnified. Christians are called to confess the sins they have done and left undone—and *only* those, and *no more* than those. The ‘unfounded fears that there is sin *where there is none*’ that marks scrupulosity is still a vice, one which the use of moral distinctions is essential to avoiding.<sup>18</sup>

## V. The Limits of Biblical Anthropology

I have thus far presented three de-

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Lee Anderson, ‘Sex, Temptation, and the Gay Christian: What Chastity Demands’, 20 June 2018, <https://mereorthodoxy.com/sex-temptation-gay-christian-chastity-demands/>.



fences against common criticisms of sexual identity language. First, I have argued that sexual identity need not be read as an identity whose grammatical ontology displaces the overarching truth of identity in Christ. Second, insofar as sexuality is a postlapsarian phenomenon, some kind of descriptive language is necessary to help us grapple well with our postlapsarian reality, and sexual identity language meets this need. Third, the disposition which in its postlapsarian state is called 'being gay' can also include other components—like the absence of temptation toward opposite-sex lust—which may be part of God's prelapsarian design.

One major objection to the language of sexual identity and sexual orientation remains to be addressed. According to this criticism, using sexual identity categories is forbidden because such categories do not appear within the biblical texts. 'Everyone loses', writes Butterfield, 'when we define ourselves using categories that God does not.'<sup>19</sup>

Depending on what is meant by 'defining ourselves', Butterfield may indeed be right. Certainly, when human beings are categorized in ways that contradict God's revealed truth about us, these categorizations are detrimental and invite gentle correction. Likewise, when our most significant sources of self-understanding come from anything other than the voice of God, we are poised for either idolatry or idolatry.

If Butterfield means, however, that the use of identity categories not directly articulated in Scripture is an affront to biblical anthropology, then

she offers a severely limited vision of biblical anthropology. The Bible never purports to answer every anthropological question or provide every possible categorization. The Bible is sufficient but not exhaustive. To insist that the Bible answers every question is to do violence to the text by forcing it to speak in ways it was never meant to speak.

Although no other facet of human experience offers a precise corollary to sexuality, we could offer innumerable examples of human categories which are not discussed in the Bible but may still have explanatory value in various settings: height, body type, metabolism, coordination, IQ, neurotypicality or neuroatypicality, enneagram types, sports team allegiances. To categorize people according to these divisions is not to institute a new definition of humanity in contradistinction to that offered by God. It is, rather, to recognize the endlessly layered complexity of diversity which God has purposefully ordained within human experience.

Indeed, whether Butterfield and her fellow critics realize it or not, they are perfectly comfortable defining themselves using categories that God does not use. In a co-written essay,<sup>20</sup> Butterfield and Burk proudly identify themselves as Reformed Protestants, invoking a theological category which quite plainly postdates the Bible. The word *Reformed* appears in the essay ten times, or more often than the word *Christian* appears in the same essay. Would any of us insist that the

19 Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered*, 96–97.

20 Denny Burk and Rosaria Butterfield, 'Learning to Hate Our Sin Without Hating Ourselves', *Public Discourse*, 4 July 2018, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/07/22066/>.

use of this extrabiblical category is contrary to Scripture?

To use category language that extends beyond the reach of what is plainly articulated by biblical anthropology is a necessarily contingent act. That is, any category language based on experiential observation is only as absolute as the experience which calls it into being. But the contingent nature of categories does not erase their value. As my personality-test-obsessed friends often remind me, the goal of contingent personality categories is not to discretely separate people from one another but to reckon thoughtfully with the observed differences in their dispositions and experiences. A biblical anthropology which fears to acknowledge such differences is too frail to exist in the real world.

If the critics of sexual identity language were correct about the inevitable spiritual detriment of such language, my own coming out as gay

should have signalled the demise of my spiritual life. In fact, I have found the reverse to be true. Identifying myself as gay has facilitated healthy openness and relational intimacy with Christian brothers and sisters, informed wise decision making about how to pursue the vocation of celibacy with integrity, and expanded my opportunities to share with those outside the church the difference Jesus makes in my life.

Is it possible for sexual identity language to be used in unwise and counterproductive ways? Of course—just as it is possible for dispositional, national or denominational identities to be so misused. But the potential danger of words is not an argument for expunging them from our language. What matters is whether we use words in ways that speak truthfully and advance the upside-down kingdom of Jesus. I, for one, am grateful to have found sexual identity words that can do just that.

# Designed for Flourishing

Joshua Steely

## I. Introduction

Where do we root a Christian understanding of human sexuality, and what shape does it take? Many have the impression that Christian sexual ethics are a litany of inexplicable prohibitions, justified only by tradition or divine fiat. In a world of increasing sexual permissiveness, the number of sexual relationships, practices, and identities that evangelical Christianity does not condone stands in ever sharper relief. Can we still say that the Christian sexual ethic, with all its restrictions, remains not only true but good for humans?

Theological anthropology, especially as communicated by the doctrine of creation, provides a clear affirmative answer.<sup>1</sup> Creation offers great insight for our understanding of human sexuality, as highlighted by the fact that Jesus identified the creation narrative as the locus for a proper understanding of marriage (Mk 10:2–12).<sup>2</sup> The Christian sexual ethic

is grounded not only in God's authority as creator, but in God's design for His human creatures. A positive Christian understanding of sexuality undergirds the negative prohibitions of sexual immorality. God's design is good and for our good. The church must seek to express this truth clearly and consistently.

Of course, nothing more is required to justify Christian obedience to the biblical prohibitions against promiscuity, adultery, lust, homosexuality, and other sexual practices than the conviction that God has spoken on the matter. But if we do not understand *why* the prohibitions have been given—if our sexual ethics are Christian but our understanding of sexuality is formed by secular and pagan culture—we will have an unresolved tension in our hearts and minds. That unresolved tension is readily exploited by the change agents of Western culture, resulting in compromised moral reasoning.

It is imperative, therefore, that our sexual ethics not be a free-floating series of prohibitions detached from a Christian understanding of sexuality—which is a facet of Christian theological anthropology. Human sexuality is grounded in creation and intended to serve God's purpose for

<sup>1</sup> David H. Kelsey notes that "The traditional doctrinal home of theological anthropology has been a doctrine of *creation*", but he also discusses how other loci have been proposed more recently. Kelsey, 'The Human Creature', in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 122 (italics in original).

<sup>2</sup> See Robert A. J. Gagnon, 'Sexuality', in *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, ed.

Gerald R. McDermott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 449–50.

human flourishing. Beginning with God the triune creator and His desire for human flourishing, we can see the meaning of sexuality unfold in the creation accounts of Genesis 1–2, and we can set creation anthropology in the context of the further developments in the drama of redemption.

## II. Creator, Creation and Creatures

The most basic statement in theological anthropology is that the human being is a creature.<sup>3</sup> We are neither gods nor accidents. We were made and did not make ourselves. As creatures, we cannot understand ourselves apart from understanding our creator. A key to our self-understanding lies in the doctrine of creation, and creatureliness must shape our self-understanding at every point.

The first and fundamental point of reference for any creature is its creator. From the creator come design and purpose—cosmology and teleology alike. This observation justifies placing the initial accent in theological anthropology on the *theological* rather than on the anthropology. ‘Christian anthropology ... does not start with “the phenomenon of human being” as a societal, individual, or even a theological construct. It starts with God.’<sup>4</sup> We understand ourselves most clearly by looking first without, not within.

Who made us? What is our creator like?

If these are impossible questions to answer, then we can know ourselves only provisionally; anthropology then becomes a science, subject to the same methods and limitations as chemistry or physics. In fact, if we cannot answer the questions about our creator, then we may not be sure that we are creatures at all. We may be accidents, in which case anthropology may actually be merely an extension of chemistry and physics, a description of how chemical processes lead to the bizarre spectacle of (apparently) self-aware organisms moving about and interacting. We may, as far as we know, be a rather unconscious joke produced accidentally by an unthinking and unfeeling universe. If that were the case, I think that most of us would find the joke in pretty poor taste.

But God *has* spoken; therefore, it is possible for us to know about him with certainty. We can know that we are creatures. We can know about him and about ourselves. Francis Schaeffer described this fact well after reflecting on a couple passages from the Lamentations of Jeremiah: ‘For man is not just a chance configuration of atoms in the slipstream of meaningless chance history. No. Man, made in the image of God, has a purpose—to be in relationship to the God who is there. And whether it is in Jeremiah’s day, or in our own recent generations, the effect is the same. Man forgets his purpose, and thus he forgets who he is and what life means.’<sup>5</sup>

Anthropology is then a patient and

3 As Richard Lints points out in *Identity and Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 24, this is also basic to understanding our relationship with God, our Creator.

4 Cherith Fee Nordling, “The Human Person in the Christian Story,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 65.

5 Francis A. Schaeffer, *Death in the City* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 35.

careful listening to what God has said about us, in the same way as (and related to) theology proper's attentive listening to what God has said about himself. As Richard Lints pithily puts it, 'We are the way we are because God is the way he is, and we are the way we are because we are not God.'<sup>6</sup> Divine revelation tells us that God is infinitely wise, powerful and good. Correspondingly, what God has created is well-designed, purposeful and intended for flourishing. Our existence is meaningful and we may speak meaningfully of human destiny.

Yet, importantly, God's revelation is more than just verbal and propositional. The climax of divine revelation is missional—the sending of God the Son through God the Spirit by God the Father, and of God the Spirit by God the Son from God the Father. The tri-personal coming of God to us is the most profound element in divine revelation. Even when we consider revelation that was given long before the triune missions, we do not consider it apart from those missions. So Christian exegesis of Genesis 1, for instance, recognizes the account of God (v. 1), present in the Spirit (v. 2), creating all things by the Word (v. 3).

God the Holy Trinity is our maker. Creation comes not as the desperate act of a needy god, but as the work of an infinitely loving God who already enjoys perfect communion in the fullness of divine life. 'It is important to emphasize that God's triune life of perfect communication and communion exists before us, apart from us, and without any need of us.'<sup>7</sup> Only the

Christian conception of God, decisively revealed in the Father's sending of the Son and the Spirit, puts creation in the proper perspective of divine superabundance. God, who knows what perfect flourishing is, creates in order to bless; God truly desires the flourishing of his creatures.

### III. Genesis 1: Days, Dominion and Gender

The creation narrative of Genesis 1 is a complex literary work of tremendous theological richness as it describes the forming and filling of the world. With regard to humanity, the first thing to notice is the place of mankind in the narrative structure. Humanity is the capstone creature—created on the sixth and final day of the creation week, together with the other creatures that move along the ground, but clearly distinguished from them, with a unique place among the beings that fill God's good earth.

Mankind's distinction is marked by a radical break in the pattern of divine creative activity. The process until this point has been marked by efficacious divine speech; with an authoritative command God has summoned being from nothingness, order from chaos, and life from inertia. But now the narrative shifts. Divine speech still leads the way, but it is the speech of deliberation: 'Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness" ' (v. 26). It is possible that the plural of this discourse is another indicator of God's tri-unity.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the*

*Bible and Its Interpretation* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 5.

<sup>8</sup> See Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 12;

In a majestic pause, the triune Creator declares His intention to crown creation with a creature made in the Creator's image. This is the last act of creation, the completing stroke after which God rests in sovereign enjoyment of His handiwork (1:31–2:3).

Even more than our distinctive place in the creation narrative, the *imago Dei* has captured the theological imagination throughout history and has held a definitive place in Christian understanding of human identity. It is often treated as the keystone in theological anthropology, though some recent theologians have regarded it as over-emphasized because it receives little attention in the canon. But while acknowledging the scarcity of direct references to the image of God in the Scriptures, Marc Cortez avers that 'even when the *imago Dei* is not explicitly stated, it is frequently assumed.'<sup>9</sup> We should at least recognize that, if the image of God is not frequently mentioned, its mentions are momentarily positioned.

Other creatures are made after their 'kind', but humans are made in God's image and likeness.<sup>10</sup> This does not nullify our creaturehood; we stand, together with the rest of the works of creation, on the same side

of that infinite qualitative gap that separates creator from creatures, God from all that is not God.<sup>11</sup> But there is also an essential gap separating us from the rest of creation, the utter uniqueness of the *imago Dei*.

Humans are like God, with the likeness of an image, made to resemble Him. Theological anthropology has wrestled extensively to understand what this means, proposing understandings of the *imago Dei* that may be labelled ontological, functional and relational—that is, that the image of God is what we are, what we do or how we relate, respectively. As we follow the text, we will see all three of these elements appear, in intertwined fashion. Being precedes doing; doing flows from being; but (mis)doing can also disorder being.

This interplay of aspects is important to note. It reminds us that, on one hand, humans are *made* in the image of God and therefore never cease to be in God's image no matter what action they take (or fail to take). Regardless of how corrupt or comatose they may be, every human bears the image of God and retains the dignity and distinction implied thereby (cf. Gen 9:6). On the other hand, imaging God is not only a matter of being but also of behaviour, and we can reflect God's likeness to a greater or lesser extent by our actions and relations. Sin, which is opposed to God's character and will, distorts our imaging of God and thus impairs our ability to realize our true identity.

The image that connects humans

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Nonna Verna Harrison, *God's Many-Splendored Image: Theological Anthropology for Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 170, attests to patristic interpretation on these lines.

<sup>9</sup> Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 15.

<sup>10</sup> See Catherine McDowell, 'In the Image of God He Created Them', in *The Image of God in an Image-Driven Age*, ed. Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 38.

<sup>11</sup> On the radical distinction between God and even human creatures, see Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 77.

with God comes together with a sacred vocation and the connection between humanity and the rest of the living creatures.<sup>12</sup> Sandwiched between the divine discourse describing the intent to create mankind in the *imago Dei* (Gen 1:26a) and the statement of this creative accomplishment (v. 27) is another statement of divine intention: ‘and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth’ (v. 26b). Then, after the creation of humanity in God’s image, this statement of intent is expressed as a vocation: ‘God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth” ’ (v. 28). We are unique among the creatures, but from our very creation our lives are entwined with theirs.

We act out God’s image in our role and function as rulers over creation. God is Lord over all, and so to be in His image means to exercise loving lordship over His works, as sub-rulers entrusted with dominion by the cosmic King.<sup>13</sup> “Dominion” constitutes one aspect of the image of God in humankind, because if humans are to represent God, they must some-

how participate in his kingly qualities. But the kingdom or the reign of God is not one of brute force, but of loving fatherhood.<sup>14</sup> As God creates out of His own superabundance of life and bliss, so He charges the creatures made in His image with the task of nurturing His works. Environmental concern is basic to human nature. We are instruments in the divine agenda for creation’s flourishing.<sup>15</sup>

And just as the *imago Dei* is connected with human vocation, it is likewise connected with human relations. ‘God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them’ (v. 27). Sexual differentiation is a key aspect of human identity in the divine image.<sup>16</sup> Of course, sexual differentiation is not unique to humanity, but it is not mentioned in the creation of any other creatures that possess it. For the animals, male and female is simply biology; for humans, it is something deeper, a profound factor in identity.

Gender is the basic binary distinction of humanity. It shows us to be, like our Creator, profoundly relational. ‘Being human in God’s image is fundamentally about communion, loving God and neighbor. That is always an embodied love, a love that fully engages the whole human

<sup>12</sup> Hans Schwarz expresses a strongly functional understanding of the *imago Dei* in *The Human Being: A Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 23. However, it is questionable whether his denial of the ontological aspect can stand in light of Gen. 9:6.

<sup>13</sup> See John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 785–86.

<sup>14</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 139–40.

<sup>15</sup> Harrison, *God’s Many-Splendored Image*, 124.

<sup>16</sup> Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 14; cf. Kelly M. Kapic, ‘Anthropology’ in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 175–76. Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 792, sees a connection but does not regard the sexual binary as the *imago*’s meaning.

being.<sup>17</sup> None of us lives as a generic human; rather, as gendered humans, man and woman, we live and relate.<sup>18</sup>

Some theologians have seen in this nature a hint of the Trinity, God's mysterious unity and multiplicity, His essential relationality. So Cherith Fee Nordling: 'Human "being" and identity are grounded in the reality of the triune communion of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Bearing the image of God who is "being-in-relation," we too are constituted as distinct beings in essential relationality with God and others.'<sup>19</sup> God made creatures in His likeness who would have the capacity for deep relationships and derive joy from them. Our need for human relationships points ultimately to our need for a relationship with our Creator.

Further, the integration of our relational and functional aspects should not be missed.<sup>20</sup> Humans are created in God's image as male and female. They are then commanded to embrace the divine vocation, to which their binary distinction and relationality will be essential: 'and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it" ' (v. 28). As Kelly Kopic explains, 'Humans were created to live not as isolated, autonomous individuals but in community with one

another and in life-giving connection with the material world as the environment for communion with God.'<sup>21</sup> Ecology and sexuality go together, both are rooted in identity, and all is to be seen in the light of God's plan for the flourishing of His creation.

Flourishing in God's design is not merely a human-centred or even a creation-centred agenda; our flourishing is meant to involve and occasion praise of our Creator. That is, the creation account remains a religious text. The human vocation may be described as an ecological priesthood.<sup>22</sup> Richard Lints explains:

The liturgical shape of the first table [Gen 1:1-2:3] points to the conclusion that the created order as portrayed in Genesis 1 is a kind of temple in which the glory of God is reflected and the divine presence rests. In this respect creation is a theatre for the worship of God, though he is not merely a stage presence, but intends to be present throughout the created order. The created order is temple-like because it is filled with the presence of the divine King, the purpose for which God built this temple in the first instance.<sup>23</sup>

In the grand design, the human purpose is worship, and to this purpose our priestly identity in the *imago Dei* is tied. We are to worship the divine Creator and display the divine image by our likeness to Him.<sup>24</sup> Hu-

17 Kopic, 'Anthropology', 178.

18 See Molly T. Marshall, *What It Means To Be Human* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1995), 75.

19 Nordling, 'The Human Person', 70 (emphasis in original). See also Anderson, *On Being Human*, 105: 'The content of the *imago* is experienced as differentiation within unity'.

20 See the connection drawn by Edwin C. Hui (Xu Zhi-Wei), *At the Beginning of Life: Dilemmas in Theological Bioethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 145.

21 Kopic, 'Anthropology', 188.

22 See Frame's description of the priestly office of human dominion in *Systematic Theology*, 790-91.

23 Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*, 53.

24 On the representational dimension of the image, see Thiselton, *Systematic Theol-*



man gender and sexuality are thus part of a great confluence of realities governing human identity and purpose.<sup>25</sup>

#### IV. Genesis 2: Dust, Breath and a Rib

Turning to Genesis 2, we see some of the same themes expressed in different ways and with different emphases. Because there are two successive creation accounts, the repetition of themes and variety of details together provide richer theological insight into an event of such foundational significance. Perhaps there is an analogy here to the canonical presence of four gospels, whose cumulative testimony unpacks the greater event of the work of Christ. In any case, the two creation accounts are constructive in their differences—complementary, not contradictory.

Whereas the first creation account supplied the pivotal knowledge that mankind is made in the image of God, the second account elaborates on the functional and relational aspects of human identity in the image. This is especially helpful for developing an understanding of human sexuality rooted in creation. But the setting of the man-woman relationship keeps readers conscious of the human-nature relationship, as well as of the human-divine relationship that undergirds both.

Mankind's stewardship is front-loaded in the account with the obser-

vation that the ground is unproductive without people to work it (2:5). In the creation of man, the human connection with the earth is stressed, for 'the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground' (v. 7a). We are of the earth. This fact points once again to the fundamental environmental concern of humanity, but also to our creatureliness and inherent frailty. Having been elevated with the knowledge that we are made in God's image, we are brought back 'down to earth' with the knowledge that we are dust.

Yet we are *God's* dust, his workmanship, formed by his hand; and God, having fashioned the man, 'breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being' (v. 7b). 'The beautiful picture of God stooping in the mud to form the human persons, sharing with these special beings the very breath of life, God's own spirit, suggests the intimacy of God's relationship to these unique creatures.'<sup>26</sup> We are creatures, but clearly we are beloved creatures, specially blessed in God's creative work.

The man formed of earth is given charge over earth. God made a marvellous home for his favoured creature, a paradisiacal garden: 'Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it' (v. 15). Humans' flourishing will be connected with their vocation in bringing about the flourishing of creation under their charge. The earth for which mankind cares will be their own sustenance and delight (v. 9), and the animal world is also under human authority (vv. 19–20).

This is the point where the binary

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ogy, 140; Schwarz, *The Human Being*, 24.

<sup>25</sup> This observation helps to justify the strong attention to matters of sexuality characteristic of evangelicals; see Gagnon, 'Sexuality', 449.

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<sup>26</sup> Marshall, *What It Means*, 28.

of human relationality re-enters the picture. Lions and oxen are good, but not good enough for what God has in mind (v. 20). 'Man's best friend' will prove insufficient as man's divinely appointed helper. The solitude of the first man, the lack of a complementary partner for him, is the first thing in a thoroughly good creation that God calls not good (v. 18).<sup>27</sup>

The divine solution to this solitude is of essential significance. In the words of Molly Marshall, "The creation of humanity is not complete until there is male and female. The biblical writer's point is that women and men form the basic unit of the human family and, as male and female human beings, express the wholeness of humanity."<sup>28</sup>

God created a complementary partner for man: woman. He created her out of the rib of the man, which expresses indirectly her sharing in the fellowship with the earth, and directly her sharing in the man's total humanity (vv. 21–22). Man and woman are equally human, possessed of a basic unity. But man and woman are also definitely distinct, characterized by an essential binary difference. This is captured in the man's statement upon receiving his partner (v. 23): 'This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.'

The relational distinction of humanity from the first creation account is reinforced in the second. Man and woman are equally human, but they are not the same. They are nei-

ther changeable nor interchangeable. Every human is either male or female and, correspondingly, man or woman. Scientifically, we have come to understand that this is true at the genetic level. But theologically, the created binary of humanity was made known to us long before we had knowledge of XX and XY chromosomal pairs.

Such a complementary distinction is of utmost relevance to human sexuality. When the first man needed a fit partner for the task of stewardship over creation, God did not create another man; he created woman. The man received her and noted their unity and distinction. Then the Scripture says, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh' (v. 24). The complementary distinction of man and woman, the relational binary, is the grounds for their unitive married sexuality.

In this way, the biological complementarity of human sexuality attains a spiritual significance, as it expresses a return to unity in difference. As Robert Gagnon explains, 'Marriage is God's instrument for *reuniting* the male and female into an integrated sexual whole. This purpose is symbolized by the copulative act (and partly effected by it) and illustrated by the story of woman's creation from Adam's "side" (a better translation than "rib").'<sup>29</sup>

## V. Summation: Binary

### Distinction and Sexual Union

What does the theological anthropology of Genesis 1–2 tell us about

<sup>27</sup> See Anderson, *On Being Human*, 113.

<sup>28</sup> Marshall, *What It Means*, 77; see Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 35.

<sup>29</sup> Gagnon, 'Sexuality', 453 (emphasis in original).

human sexuality? It provides the foundation for the Christian understanding of gender as binary and sexual intimacy as proper to marriage (in the traditional Christian sense). Both concepts can be described positively and clarified negatively.

First, gender is the good gift of God. He did not create generic humans but male and female, man and woman. Both are created in the image of God, and they image God together. Human identity as the divine image-bearer is partially realized in our binary gender distinction and connected with our vocation of stewardship. Manhood is glorious and womanhood is glorious too. It is a privilege and delight to bear the image of God in our gendered specificity, and to flourish as man and woman in God's world.

Against transgenderism and related ideologies, the creation account teaches that there are two and only two genders. We may distinguish gender from biological sex, but we cannot detach it. God created humanity as male and female—man and woman respectively. Our biology is not incidental to our gender identity but determinative of it.

Second, sexual intimacy is the good gift of God. When a man and a woman are united in the covenant of marriage, they proceed to enjoy sexual intimacy, with its manifold aspects of pleasure, procreation, affection and union. The last of these is the most central and theologically significant aspect of the sexual act. Robert Gagnon is worth quoting at length here:

Marriage serves a vital purpose, not merely for procreation and childrearing, sexual gratification and intimate companionship, but also for being reshaped, through reintegration with one's sexual

complement, into the human being that God intends. However, this does not mean that one *must* be in a sexual relationship in order to be formed into God's image, for God has other means at his disposal to shape his human creation, including the difficulties of sexual abstinence (note Jesus' and Paul's own celibacy). Nevertheless, if a sexual relationship is to be had, it must be had in such a way that the image of God is enhanced, not effaced. The requirements for sexual purity always take precedence over longings for a sexual relationship, where the two are in conflict.<sup>30</sup>

Against adultery, promiscuity, polyamory, homosexuality, pornography, bestiality and rape, the creation account teaches that sexual intimacy belongs exclusively in a loving, monogamous heterosexual relationship. Sex is not merely about procreation but it is also not merely about pleasure or even love. It is a profoundly unitive act in which the human binary of man and woman is reunited. Sexual acts apart from this union are a distortion of God's design for sexual intimacy.

## VI. Clarification: Deviations from the Normative

Before proceeding to connect this creational paradigm to the realities of fall and redemption, we should clarify it in two ways: regarding sexual expression outside this paradigm and

<sup>30</sup> Gagnon, 'Sexuality', 454–55 (emphasis in original). See also John Behr, *Becoming Human: Meditations on Christian Anthropology in Word and Image* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2013), 72–83.

regarding abstinence from sexual acts (celibacy). These are both exceptions to the norm established in creation, but the former is prohibited by Scripture whereas the latter is permitted and even encouraged. How does the logic of God's design in creation connect with the more explicit teachings of Scripture about human sexuality?

Regarding other sexual activity, one might object that the creation account does not decisively limit sexual expression. Even if we grant that sex is designed to be unitive between man and woman, does that really necessitate a monogamous or a loving union? And does that purpose really delegitimize all other sexual unions, particularly homosexual relationships?

I maintain that these implications are legitimately derived from the creation narrative. The fact that sex is a profoundly unitive act does indeed imply that the sexual act should be monogamous, covenantal, loving and complementary (i.e. heterosexual). However, the argument of this article is not so much that Christian sexual ethics can be wholly and explicitly derived from Genesis 1–2, but that the creation account is foundational and provides the underlying logic for the sexual ethics presented elsewhere in Scripture.

In other words, there is no need to prove the whole Christian sexual ethic from the creation paradigm. Rather, the creation paradigm is the point of departure for Christian sexual ethics, and it shows the significance of the explicit prohibitions of various sexual acts found in the Bible. God cares enough about our flourishing to have addressed this area with abundant clarity.

So if one asks, 'How do we know that the divine design for human

sexuality revealed in creation does not allow for adultery?' we may turn to the clear proscriptions of adultery in such passages as Exodus 20:14 and Matthew 15:19. If the question is 'Why is adultery forbidden?' the first place to turn for an answer is the creation account and the unitive meaning of sexuality: adultery violates the marriage union.

Of course, few people need an explanation of why adultery is forbidden in Christian sexual ethics. But this practice of understanding sexual ethics creationally and canonically applies to the issues more widely disputed in contemporary society as well. Perhaps most important, it shows the coherence of Christian opposition to homosexual practice. The biblical prohibitions against homosexual activity are clear and quite pronounced (Lev 18:22; Rom 1:24–27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10). But someone influenced by the cultural forces that have been so powerfully at work in Western society over the last decade could easily be puzzled by the biblical condemnation of a behaviour that so many people have come to accept as natural and good. The creation narrative, with its emphasis on sexual complementarity and unity, explains why homosexuality is contrary to God's design for human flourishing.

The same applies to polyamory, a rising candidate for normalization in Western society—though the situation here is more complicated, because it requires tracing the canonical development of the Bible's teaching on this issue. Polygamy abounds in the Old Testament and was practised by many of the Old Testament saints. But when we come to the New Testament, the ethical standard is unequivocally monogamous. This is best explained

by turning to the creation account and understanding that polygamy was not part of God's design for human sexuality, but that for whatever reason He permitted it for a time. This does not mean that it was good even in the case of Old Testament heroes who engaged in the practice, and in the clarity of the new covenant we are called to embrace God's good design. A parallel may be found in the case of divorce, where Jesus dismissed the permissive Mosaic legislation and called disciples instead to attend to God's creational intent (Mk 10:2–12).

But if these deviations from the creation paradigm are, indeed, illegitimate, what about celibacy? Abstinence, too, is a divergence from marital sexuality. A divergence in the form of non-participation is categorically different from engaging in immoral sexual activity; nonetheless, if Genesis 1–2 were the whole of revelation, we might conclude that celibacy too falls short of God's perfect plan.

The broader witness of Scripture shows that this is not the case. Even if the Old Testament tends to correlate a fertile marriage with the blessing of God, things are radically different in the New Testament. Surely there can be no more convincing argument for the virtue of celibacy than the example of Jesus, who is true man, fully human and without any blemish of sin.

What has changed? Christ has ushered in the Kingdom of God, which is partially realized even now. Under this new covenant, the creation paradigm of married sexuality persists side by side with a paradigm of singleness for the sake of the Kingdom. 'Marriage was no longer to be regarded as a duty of Torah or as a necessary condition for human fulfillment and divine approval. Of course, until

the Kingdom comes celibacy is not a duty either (Mt 19:12), and marriage remains an option.'<sup>31</sup> Both are permissible and blessed alternatives for God's people in the present time (1 Cor 7), whereas sexual activity apart from the creational design is not.<sup>32</sup>

Interestingly enough, if the New Testament shows a preference, it is for celibacy in service to God (1 Cor 7:32, 38). As Barry Danylak says, 'Looked at positively as a celebration of the complete sufficiency of Christ, singleness can be a powerful witness for the gospel.'<sup>33</sup> The advancement of the Kingdom takes precedence over all other concerns, and human identity is ultimately found in Christ, in God the Son who became man for us. Gender identity and sexual expression have not disappeared, but they are superseded by fellowship with Christ and with one another in him. So the Christian who does not desire to marry, or who is otherwise unable to have a healthy sexual relationship after the pattern of creation, is not doomed to an unfulfilled life or a less actualized human identity.

## VII. Conclusion: Design, Disruption and Destiny

Creation is the beginning place for a Christian response to the sexual chaos of contemporary Western (and, to

<sup>31</sup> Barry L. Bandstra and Allen D. Verhey, 'Sex', in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., vol. 4, gen. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 435.

<sup>32</sup> See Bandstra and Verhey, 'Sex', 436; Barry Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 196.

<sup>33</sup> Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*, 140.

some extent, global) society, but it is not the whole story. Creation shows the design for human sexuality, but that design must be brought into the world we presently inhabit and understood in light of its disruption and destiny.

Christian ethics will be horribly skewed if we fail to recognize that Genesis 1 and 2 were followed by Genesis 3. That sounds silly, but in practice this error is all too common. Even in secular contexts, a theology of creation is frequently brought into discourse on sexuality while overlooking any notion of the fall. Two standard expressions of this theology that are applied to people who embrace some sexual aberration—each one a premise in the total argument, though often only one or the other is stated—are ‘God made you this way’, and ‘God doesn’t make mistakes’. The former statement is false, though it implies the latter (true) premise; the latter is true, but it implies the former (false) premise.

Since these theologies do not take the fall into account and therefore hold that human sexuality as experienced now is fully in accord with God’s design, they may be classified as alternative doctrines of humanity. The appropriate setting for such a doctrine of humanity is not Christianity—for which Genesis 3 is acutely significant—but the vaguely theistic and implicitly deistic worldview of popular Western spirituality.

Christian theological anthropology, however, is aware not only of our created design but also of the disruption caused by the fall into sin (Gen 3). G. K. Chesterton said, ‘The primary paradox of Christianity is that the ordinary condition of man is not his sane or sensible condition; that the

normal itself is an abnormality. That is the inmost philosophy of the Fall.’<sup>34</sup>

Theologians debate whether the *imago Dei* was untouched, defaced or demolished by the fall,<sup>35</sup> but the immediate recorded consequences of sin include disruption of mankind’s being (death, Gen 3:19), vocation (the resistance of the land to human dominion, vv. 17–19), and relations (the striving between man and woman, v. 16). Even more significantly and more tragically, the consummate consequence of sin was separation from God. Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden (vv. 22–24). The creatures made in the image of God are now estranged from God, and only God can bring them back to himself.

Sexual immorality, in all its variety, is sin. But sexual sin receives particular attention in Scripture, perhaps because of the intimate connections between sexuality and human identity, vocation and relations. Having rooted sexual ethics in creation, we must not make the mistake of regarding sexual sin as merely a rather benign failure to receive God’s best intentions for our lives. Scripture does not treat it so lightly.

34 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy: The Romance of Faith* (New York: Image Books, 1990), 158.

35 Usually one of the latter two options is advocated. Cortez (*Theological Anthropology*, 16–17) cites a general agreement that the image has been affected by sin. But see John F. Kilner, ‘Humanity in God’s Image: Is the Image Really Damaged?’ *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53, no. 3 (September 2010): 601–17. Kilner argues that the Bible does not provide grounds for the commonplace theological belief that the image of God was damaged, distorted or destroyed by the fall.

God created this world for flourishing, and flourishing in accordance with God's plan is to live properly as humans; in contrast, twisting God's good design defaces our human identity and dishonours the God whose image we bear. 'The [biblical] story considered as a whole suggests that the overriding dimension of the creatures' relationship to their Creator is that of worship and honour. Conversely, the subverting of that relationship carries the connotation of perversion, corruption, consumption and self-worship.'<sup>36</sup>

If our maleness and femaleness, and the possibility of uniting male and female in the bond of marital sexual intimacy, are connected with God's design for humanity—as the creation account demonstrates—then the wrongness of sexual immorality emerges in stark relief. Sexual sin, the apostle Paul says, is to sin against one's own body (1 Cor 6:18). It is a direct negation of the image of God in the human person, a denial of God's design and even of God himself. No appeal to the goodness of pleasure or human love can justify this defiance of God and defacement of His image in mankind. In pursuing human flourishing on our own terms, we invariably become further mired in our alienation from God.

But the Christian message does not end there; alienation is only the state of the problem, not the final word. Defying creation or denying the fall in pursuit of autonomy leads only to further brokenness; the ultimate tragedy of denying the fall is that you also lose the gospel. Without a doctrine of the fall, there is no place for a doctrine of

redemption. But there was a fall, and God has acted, in mercy and majesty and might, for our redemption. Flourishing remains a possibility because of the restorative work of God. When our first parents lost their innocence, God provided clothing for them, 'garments of skin' (Gen 3:21). Something died to cover them. In this gesture of grace, God foreshadowed the death that would cover the sins of all those who receive the gift of life and would restore in them the tarnished *imago Dei*.

For Jesus Christ, God the Son, 'is the image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15); yet, for our redemption, he became incarnate, 'being made in the likeness of men' (Phil 2:7). He covered our sins with his blood shed on the cross (Heb 9:14). Those who receive the salvation God graciously gives have a glorious destiny, which includes being 'conformed to the image of his Son' (Rom 8:29).

The *telos* of human sexuality is its eclipse by the reality it was given to symbolize. Presumably, the resurrection body includes gender, but resurrection life does not include marriage (Mt 22:30). Instead, our longed-for union with God will be fully realized. The church will be united with Christ, her groom (Rev 19:7–9). God's people will dwell with him and the Scripture will be fulfilled: 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and he will dwell among them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be among them' (Rev 21:3). The union of man and woman will give way to union with God. In those simple words that speak of an indescribable wonder, 'they will see his face' (Rev 22:4).

36 Lints, *Identity and Idolatry*, 61–62.

# The Emerging Church and Traditional Christian Understanding of Human Sexuality and the Family

Kristina Pickett

I was at lunch with a friend, discussing our families—as we usually do, as most of my friends and I have grown children living away from home. Typically, we discuss our adult children's career choices and relationships. But this particular luncheon, although pleasant, left me a bit unsettled in my spirit.

You see, I'm no longer shocked when we discuss how some of our unmarried children have decided to move in with their love interest—who may or may not be of the same sex—although I should be shocked, since they have all come from Christian families. But now I am noticing an even more unsettling trend: some of the parents are shifting along with the kids.

My friend explained to me how she had just learned that her son was in a same-sex relationship. She then went on to say how happy she was that he was happy, and that he was still a Christian who had taken on a career as an LGBTQ advocate. Until now, she stated, she had failed to understand that the Bible was a product of ancient Near Eastern culture and

addressed issues relevant to that specific time. She no longer viewed the contemporary LGBTQ lifestyle as inconsistent with godly living. I listened in silence, partially because I was so dismayed and partially because I had just had virtually the same discussion with another friend.

Why are so many families struggling with secular values among our 'churched' children—or simply capitulating to secularism? Why aren't they solidly grounded in basic morality with regard to sexuality? Why is the church veering away from sound doctrinal exegesis with regard to sexuality and godly living? Although the attractions of their increasingly secular surroundings may be partly responsible, another reason is a frequent lack of sound doctrine and instruction on theological anthropology and sexuality within the Christian community—by which I mean both the institutionalized church and Christian homes.

Today's secular worldview is characterized by blurred lines regarding human anthropology, sex and gender. Popular opinion seems to lean to-

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wards a non-binary, non-traditional ideology that affirms personal preference over both traditional moral beliefs and biological facts. Technology can determine the gender of an unborn child, yet in our modern culture, the child's self-awareness becomes the determinant of gender identification. Furthermore, when the self turns to subjective human experience and popular opinion rather than to any objective authority for its moral guidance, the self ends up becoming autonomous, the determining factor of all life choices.

In this regard, it is appropriate to consider the so-called 'Emerging Church' and its teachings. As of 2019, some might claim that the Emerging Church is a passing fad and is already losing its relevance, although in view of the popularity of one of its forerunners—Rob Bell, who is currently booking sold-out appearances throughout the United States and United Kingdom—this claim is questionable.

Bell subscribes to Richard Rohr's seven themes of an alternative orthodoxy, which claim that the traditional exegesis of Scripture propagates exclusivity. The alternative orthodoxy gives substantial authority to life experiences rather than to the doctrines stated in the word of God. It proclaims a non-dogmatic theology that reflects universalism, though without claiming explicitly to be universalist. The Emerging Church is an evolving movement that spans the globe but has no formal structure; perhaps the only factor that makes it cohesive is that it embraces postmodern critiques of traditional Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

How and why is a theology that questions traditional orthodoxy and the absolute truth found in the word of God welcomed in the evangelical church? Among those who hold to a secular, materialistic worldview, we would expect that the process of decision making should be untethered from spiritual truth. The focus of this article is how the *church community* reflects and instructs on theological anthropology and its implications for human sexuality. The widespread absence of clarity on this matter presents a moral dilemma for the theological understanding of gender and sexuality, which in turn has enormous consequences for the Christian institution of the family.

The family structure is one of the foundations by which God's message is passed from generation to generation. Genesis 2:24 states that a man should leave his parents and cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh; this cleaving mirrors the oneness we experience with God who dwells in us. Similarly, 1 Corinthians 11:3 informs us that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband and the head of Christ is God. In other words, the hierarchical (though not domineering) structure of the Christian family mirrors the hierarchical divine structure of God's own family, which includes his role as creator of all mankind. Pipes and Lee state, 'God intended the family to be the most basic social unit of society.'<sup>2</sup>

ative Orthodoxy' (podcast episode 86), 10 April 2016, <http://robbell.podbean.com/e/episode-86-richard-rohr-and-the-alternative-orthodoxy/>.

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Pipes and Victor Lee, *Family to Family: Leaving a Lasting Legacy* (Alpharetta, GA: North American Mission Board of the South-

<sup>1</sup> Rob Bell, 'Richard Rohr and the Alterna-

How then do we relate the currently growing view of gender and sex to the biblical definition and role of the family? According to the Emerging Church, we have a responsibility to connect with the present generation in a manner that it considers palatable, even if that manner involves a postmodern deconstruction of Scripture that runs counter to traditional orthodoxy.

In his book *What Is the Bible?* Bell highlights the human origin of Scripture rather than the divine message of God making a way for redemption and restoration through His Son Jesus. Bell states that people wrote the stories in the Bible because they found something in them that would help them restore their dignity.<sup>3</sup> Bell argues that the inerrancy of Scripture is not crucial to realizing the highest form of truth.<sup>4</sup> Truth, he contends, is found in life experiences and interpreted by the one who is active in the experience.

Considering the ambiguity present in this exegesis, it is not surprising that Bell and many others within the Emerging Church movement fail to find a case against the LGBTQ lifestyle in Scripture. He states that the church needs to recognize the shift in cultural consciousness in regard to this lifestyle and affirm same-sex unions within the confines of monogamy, fidelity and commitment.<sup>5</sup>

There is an old saying that every good lie has a remnant of truth in it. Yes, the church must acknowledge the culture of its era so that it can reach out to people effectively—not, however, by conforming the word to the people but rather by conforming the people to the word. Therefore, in this era of postmodernism (and an increasingly postmodern church), we must urgently clarify our theological understanding of gender and sexuality. The application of such clarification is critical to preserve the Christian family unit and its role in glorifying God by reflecting the intended relationship between man and God.

## I. Characterizing Theological Anthropology

Characterizing theological anthropology requires us to examine God and man as a relational union. To do so, we must begin with creation. Genesis 1:27 informs us that God created male and female in His own image. Humans, both male and female, were created to possess a body (the material self), mind (rational functions), soul (the non-material ego), will (functions in choosing and deciding), and spirit (operating beyond earthly connections).<sup>6</sup> According to Gregg Allison, the spirit encompasses the capacity to have a relation with God.<sup>7</sup>

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ern Baptist Convention, 1999), 9.

3 Rob Bell, *What Is the Bible? How an Ancient Library of Poems, Letters, and Stories Can Transform the Way You Think and Feel about Everything* (New York: HarperOne, 2017) 291, Kindle edition.

4 Bell, *What Is the Bible?* 282.

5 Rob Bell and Andrew Wilson, 'Homosexuality and the Bible' (interview), 20

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April 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XF9uo\\_P0nNI..](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XF9uo_P0nNI..)

6 Merrill C. Tenney, *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 807.

7 Gregg R. Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 62.

This spirit, of course, is not to be confused with the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the believer and transforms the heart, mind and soul.

Hans Schwarz states that 'to be created in God's image means to be ethically shaped in conformity with God and to act in a manner for which God serves as the prototype.'<sup>8</sup> To accomplish this shaping, one must look to Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:3 informs us that 'The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being.' However, in the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve dwelt in the presence of God and communed directly with Him. The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, both of which were planted in the middle of the garden of Eden, constituted a vehicle that required Adam and Eve to exercise their free will. God commanded Adam that he was not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for if he did, he would certainly die (Gen 2:15–17).

Under temptation from a force outside the boundaries of God, disguised as the serpent, Adam and Eve fell into disobedience. Man exercised his free will to disobey God's command, even though God had made 'all kinds of trees grow out of the ground; trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food' (Gen 2:9). One must question where the true temptation lurked. There is no reason to conclude that the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was more pleasing to the eye (or the mouth) than the fruit from the other trees. The heart of the matter was the ques-

tion of authority and submission. In this regard, the Emerging Church has in effect replicated the sin of Adam and Eve by questioning the authority and validity of God's word and valuing individual experience above traditional Christian teachings.

Adam and Eve rebelled against God's authority to rightfully and righteously maintain rule over His creation. If they had trusted in God's just and good nature, there would have been no rebellion. Mankind was created to submit to the good and righteous authority of God. Temptation and disobedience would plague mankind from that moment on, throughout all future generations. Tragically, this act of disobedience would distort man's ability to reflect God's image and would permanently damage the relationship between creator and creation. The effects of this severing include the implanting of a deceptive understanding of ethics into humanity and the distortion of all social relationships, including sexually intimate relationships.

Today a similar type of rebellion is among us—a form of Christian sexual liberation justified by a liberal theology. The Emerging Church answers the secular world's call for a less stringent sexual morality by questioning the sinful nature of unrenowned men and women and the basic moral code that, according to traditional Christianity, has been implanted in the human heart.

In his 2006 book *The Secret Message of Jesus*, early Emerging Church figure Brian McLaren proposes that the primary message of Jesus concerned the coming kingdom of God, in which all those who are disenfranchised and marginalized, even notorious sinners, would be forgiven

<sup>8</sup> Hans Schwarz, *The Human Being: A Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 23.

and accepted while the heartless and merciless would be rejected.<sup>9</sup> For McLaren, in the crucifixion Christ 'took the [Roman] empire's instrument of torture and transformed it into God's symbol of the repudiation of violence—encoding a creed that love, not violence, is the most powerful force in the universe'.<sup>10</sup> McLaren's radical exegesis seems essentially to discern Christ's work as a message against injustice rather than the redemption of souls.

Jeremy Bouma reflects on this tendency in his critique of McLaren's later (2010) book *A New Kind of Christianity*. In Bouma's view, McLaren describes the human condition of 'social sin' as the result of bad systems, a dysfunctional societal machinery, destructive framing narratives and collective human evil rather than a natural inner compulsion to sin. As such, he does not view Jesus as a substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of the world.<sup>11</sup>

This understanding allows for a subjective definition of dysfunction. For example, it opens up the possibility of defining intolerance towards lifestyle choices contrary to biblical Christian values as one form of dysfunction. Hence, any objective claim to a biblical moral standard does not meet the postmodern, emergent criteria of relativism. In contrast, sound

doctrine states that God created mankind to experience sexual intimacy, as is evident in His command to 'be fruitful and multiply' (Gen 1:28), but only within the boundaries of male and female, husband and wife. Contrary to a culture that desires no fixed gender labels, gender roles are both biologically and biblically established.

## II. Gender Roles

It has been established that rightful and righteous authority belongs to God the creator of all things. He has purposefully created all things to be contingent upon each other. To sustain life, nature is dependent on climate, animal life is dependent on nature and prey, and mankind is dependent on God. Within these contingencies, God sustains all things and He has provided order.

In the divine order regarding the hierarchical structure of human creation, one cannot overlook the special position of the male throughout Scripture. The male is called to provide and protect within the family and community. God commissioned Adam to care for the garden of Eden. God had provided all that Adam would need to flourish in the garden, yet Adam was to care for God's provision. This would allow Adam to act as provider through his work.

Furthermore, the man is called to war against nations that threaten not just a physical invasion, but also an invasion of corruption and wickedness. Evidence is found in biblically recorded wars such as the Israelites' fight against the Amalekites (Ex 17:8–16), Joshua's war against the city of Jericho (Josh 6) and Gideon's battle against the Midianites (Judg 7:1–8:21), to name just a few. This is

9 Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2006), Kindle edition, 489.

10 McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 2282.

11 Jeremy Bouma, *Understand Emerging Church Theology: From a Former Emergent Insider* (Grand Rapids: Theoklesia, 2014), Kindle edition, 1562.

the nature of man by design.

Generally, the male is more aggressive and competitive than his female counterpart. This difference can be traced back to the hormone testosterone, which is more present in males than in females. On the other hand, the woman, as noted in the creation of Eve, is to be a suitable helper to the man (Gen 2:18). The woman complements and enhances the man. In this description, there is no implication that the female is inferior to the male; rather, she is his corresponding equal. Galatians 3:28 affirms this: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' All people are equal before God. Both male and female are created in God's image, and the woman is designated as the suitable companion for the man.

From a complementarian perspective on gender, which Allison defines as 'the position that men and women are complementary to one another, equal in nature yet distinct in relationships and roles',<sup>12</sup> it is clear that the male-female union offers reciprocal benefits. Generally, the female is designed with a higher capacity to be caring and nurturing. Research has found that the female brain is larger in the limbic cortex, which is responsible for regulating emotions, and that women tend to receive more sensory and emotional information than men.<sup>13</sup> This research offers biological

insight as to the differences in gender roles and deeper understanding of how the roles balance each other. Generally, within the family unit this combination provides a perfect partnership in enabling parents to raise children with a combination of firmness and empathy.

### III. The Sexual Relationship

Human sexuality is part of the human design, intended for reproduction and intimacy. Hence, the sexual relationship is ordained by God. God is not against sex when practised within Christian boundaries; on the contrary, sexual intercourse is the ultimate expression of companionship. Through the act of sex, a male and female fulfil the mandate to be fruitful and multiply and also enjoy physical oneness.

God's word provides a moral and ethical framework for sexual intimacy. A proper theological understanding of the human body must precede sexual activity so that the sexual relationship can reflect a godly union. Chet Mitchell Jechura states, 'Understanding of the human person as the *imago Dei* grounds the primacy of human dignity in theological and ethical reflection.'<sup>14</sup> Therefore, human sexuality must be analysed within its doctrinal design.

Sound doctrine is essential for Christian maturity, as it embodies what the Christian believes and strengthens the believer against the secular counter-culture. The prevalent ideology of a heightened self-awareness and self-fulfilment is

<sup>12</sup> Allison, *Baker Compact Dictionary*, 43.

<sup>13</sup> Paula K. Carlton, 'Understanding the Brain May Lead to a Satisfying Relationship', *Aurora Health Care: Women's Mental Health*, 3 July 2014, <https://www.aurorahealthcare.org/doctors/paula-k-carlton-np-ap>.

<sup>14</sup> Chet Mitchell Jechura, 'Enfleshing the Erotic', *Theology & Sexuality* 18, no. 3 (2015): 235.

rooted in a self-centred dogma and established in a profane philosophy claiming that humans have intrinsic freedom and autonomy, including the right to pursue pleasure and sensual satisfaction by following the lust of their own hearts. This sentiment is lurking beneath the Emerging Church's promotion of a flexible approach to theology, as displayed for example by Bell's tolerance of the LG-BTQ lifestyle.<sup>15</sup>

The Christological understanding is antithetical to this secular philosophy. In the Christian view of humanity, our heart, soul and mind are subject to God (Mt 22:35; Mk 12:28; Lk 10:27). Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 6:19 that the believer's body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. He states, 'You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honour God with your bodies.' This message confirms the sacredness, holiness and purity for which the body was designed. Paul's theological understanding of freedom consists of a freedom to obey God, not freedom to sin or participate in immoral behaviours.<sup>16</sup>

The difference between the two worldviews is radical. The Christian functions in union with the indwelling Holy Spirit, who instructs, guides and strengthens the heart and mind with godly principles. Although the believer has the freedom to disobey, his or her heart is characterized by

God-awareness rather than solely self-awareness. Any disobedience of which the believer becomes aware is likely to result in repentance, which God embraces in His mercy and grace. This God-awareness impacts every aspect of social experience, including human sexuality.<sup>17</sup>

#### IV. Godly Boundaries for Human Sexuality

Sexual intimacy is established by God who created male and female in His image, ordained the institution of marriage and designed it for sexual bonding. God makes it clear that the sexual act, as well as the mandate to procreate, is to be exercised within the confines of monogamy.<sup>18</sup> Hebrews 13:4 states, 'Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.' A pure marriage bed is achieved by avoiding extramarital affairs.

Previously, I observed that marriage is an institution that glorifies God and a living testimony to the Bride (the church) and the Groom (Jesus Christ). Just as the spiritual bride is to serve no other God, the earthly marriage must also be a monogamous union. Therefore, the church must understand that marriage is greater than the secular definition that has been imposed on it; marriage echoes the holy covenant that the Christian enters with God through Jesus Christ. As such, it entails specific implica-

15 Elizabeth Tenety, 'Love, Gender Roles, and the Fight for Gay Marriage: A Conversation with Rob and Kristen Bell', Berkley Center at Georgetown University, 17 November 2014, <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/love-gender-roles-and-the-fight-for-gay-marriage-a-conversation-with-rob-and-kristen-bell>.

16 Allison, *Baker Compact Dictionary*, 89.

17 Allison, *Baker Compact Dictionary*, 193–94.

18 Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 237.

tions regarding sexual intimacy; the union is exclusive, heterosexual and designed to be indissoluble.<sup>19</sup>

Regarding marriage, Jesus stated, 'So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.' He continued, 'Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning' (Mt 19:4–8). The Edenic narrative supports marriage as a union grounded in the meaning and purpose created by God.

The first husband and wife, Adam and Eve, had a monogamous relationship. God gave Adam only one female companion. In the biblical sense, Adam knew his wife. God's intent in each marriage is for the husband to 'know' his wife. The Bible is not naïve to the fact that sexually immoral thoughts may occur even in the saints. Paul addresses this temptation by counselling married couples to control their urges through regular sexual activity: 'Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control' (1 Cor 7:5). Sexual intimacy within marriage not only strengthens the marital bond but restrains the God-given sexual urge from veering off towards adulterous fornication. Therefore, the norm is for married couples to enjoy sexual intimacy often, each man with his own wife.

For the Christian, sexual ethics is

not a matter of law, custom or one's self-actualized nature; it is an act of obedience to God's word, as all actions should be. However, obedience to God's word is possible only if one believes that it carries authority. Once one questions the authority of His word, as the Emerging Church seems to do, on what grounds is there reason for obedience? God, in no ambiguous terms, has situated sexual intimacy as a vital part of the marriage relationship, thereby distinguishing it from all other social relationships. The postmodern definition of sex as a means of experiencing pleasure justifies a deviation from its original purpose, leading to sexual intimacy outside godly boundaries.

## V. Sexual Intimacy Beyond God's Boundaries

Sexual acts contrary to the biblical mandate are as old as history. Human sexuality has been repurposed as a tool for power, personal gain, intimidation, control and financial gain, as well as simply for pleasure. Stephen Ellingson suggests that 'sexuality is more than the joining of two bodies; it communicates to others something about ourselves and the kind of persons we are.' Being embodied, humans experience the world as sensual and sexual beings. Gender and sexual identity fall within normative social regimes and provide a primary criterion for determining whether an intimate relationship is viewed as 'good' or 'bad'.<sup>20</sup> Within theological boundaries, God is the one who makes this

<sup>19</sup> Walter Elwell, ed., 'Sexuality', *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Ellingson and M. Christian Green, *Religion and Sexuality in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2002), 2.

determination. Although social regimes may shift, God's word does not. What message do Christians, called to be Christ's ambassador and a light to the world, relay to others if their understanding of normative Christian sexuality shifts to reflect what is normative within the culture?

Ellingson makes the astute observation that the growing controversies in the United States over teen pregnancy, abortion rights, homosexuality and same-sex marriage suggest that 'traditional, religiously based representations of sexuality do not accurately map onto the shifting field of reality.' This presents a fundamental challenge to the church community. However, the theological understanding of human sexuality is grounded in objective truth, which does not shift to conform to the surrounding culture. Sexual desires may become overwhelmingly powerful to the point at which they not only challenge and change social norms, but also alter Christian beliefs. In fact, all physical desires and urges, if not grounded in the objective biblical truth, carry this potential to transform ethics and morality.

Avi Sion observes that the sex drive has two facets. Its basic function is reproductive; its urge is to perpetuate one's genetic makeup through descendants. This urge removes the discomfort of the metaphysical fear of nonexistence and satisfies the desire to obey an assumed divine commandment. The other facet is the urge to remove the discomfort of sexual tension by satisfying physical lust. This facet is committed to the hedonistic aspect of sex, ignoring the reproductive aspect. Engaging in masturbation, or in some cases child abuse, homosexual acts or bestiality, may satisfy this sex-

ual lust.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the major proponent of the divergent sexual relationship is hedonism, which authorizes the fulfillment of an individual's sexual desire apart from biblical confines. C. S. Lewis states, 'The most dangerous thing you can do is to take any one impulse of our own and set it up as the thing you ought to follow at all cost.'<sup>22</sup>

It is at this juncture that the Emerging Church and others challenge standard exegesis. Regarding homosexual relationships in particular, the common argument is that a loving same-sex relationship is not antithetical to scripture. Todd Wilson counters that argument in *Mere Sexuality*, stating that 'to trivialize sex is to idolize pleasure and sexual gratification becomes a god.' He adds, 'When we disconnect the act of sex from the purpose of sex, we end up marginalizing children. ... When we divorce sex from its purpose, we treat our body, or someone else's body, as though it were just a tool, something to be used by us or for us.'<sup>23</sup>

There is no exegetical support for same-sex relationships. When we consider sexual desire as a fleshly urge rather than a spiritual urge, we recognize that this desire must be submitted to Christ. Galatians 5:19–21 defines the desires of the flesh as encompassing 'sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy,

21 Avi Sion, *Volition and Allied Causal Concepts* (Geneva, Switzerland: Avi Sion, 2008), Kindle edition, 248.

22 C. S. Lewis, 'Christian Marriage', in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 93.

23 Todd Wilson, *Mere Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), Kindle edition, 99.



fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, orgies and the like.' Sexual sins are not the only grievous sins; every living soul has indulged in some aspect of the desire of the flesh at some point, as Paul expressed in Romans 7:14–25. So we should not treat sexual sins as somehow worse than all others. But our only rescue from temptation in this area, as in all other areas, is deliverance in Jesus Christ.

Pope John Paul II recognized the nature of our modern challenge to traditional morality, stating, 'The service which moral theologians are called to provide at the present time is of the utmost importance, not only for the Church's life and mission, but also for human society and culture.'<sup>24</sup> To place this comment in context, we must explore how sexual behaviours outside God's command, along with the emerging theology of compromise and relativism, affect the church and the family.

Jeff Johnston notes the slow progression from sound orthodox belief to 'confusion in the body' (of Christ) that has occurred in the last sixty-four years. Johnston cites Anglican priest Derrick Sherwin Bailey, in 1955, as publishing the first real challenge to Christian morality on homosexual practice. Now, most mainline denominations have departed from biblical truth on the issue of homosexuality, permitting the ordination of actively gay clergy and redefining marriage to include same-sex unions.<sup>25</sup> Evangeli-

cal denominations may not have formally abandoned the historic biblical position on premarital cohabitation, but many of them have become habituated to the practice. And what the church decides to condone regarding sexuality has a direct impact on the family, which looks to the church to reinforce family values.

## VI. The Church, Sexuality and Modernity

The church and modernity should be at opposite ends of the ethical spectrum. The church exists in society, in the midst of current secular social and ethical standards. Its members are 'in the world but not of it' (John 17:16). How then is the church body to exist in the world but not be influenced by its values? More particularly, how does the Christian who may be struggling with hypersexuality, gender identification or same-sex attraction maintain Christian values in a society that glorifies sexual experience?

The pleasure of erotic experience has the power to lead people to justify their sexual compulsions and confirm their perceived sexual orientation. Therefore, the body affirms what the mind or soul has proclaimed and what modern social norms have accepted as permissible.

Accordingly, Christians must recognize the seriousness of this threat and discourage pursuit outside marriage of the erotic pleasure of sexual gratification, pointing out that, as

<sup>24</sup> Pope John Paul II, 'On Relativism, Pragmatism, and Positivism', *The Catholic Thing*, 20 April 2017, <https://www.thecatholicthing.org>.

<sup>25</sup> Jeff Johnston, 'Three Reasons Why Pastors—and Other Church Leaders—Should Talk about Homosexuality in the Church',

*Focus on the Family*, 2015, <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/socialissues/sexuality/three-reasons-why-pastors-and-other-church-leaders-should-talk-about-homosexuality-in-the-church>.

with the forbidden fruit in the garden, tasting it can make one yield to its defining power. One can also point out the forms of dysfunction and abuse that frequently come with giving in to and glorifying free sexual expression.

These crucial concerns are troubling for many in God's kingdom. The church must act responsively, informingly and above all lovingly. Furthermore, the church as a whole must withstand postmodern cultural and social influences.

## VII. The Postmodern Church

How well has the church withstood postmodern opinion on sexuality? Within the general population, cohabitation has become highly acceptable. In 2016, the number of Americans living with an unmarried partner reached about eighteen million.<sup>26</sup> In the United States, only 63 percent of Christians believe that gender is determined at birth and 34 percent personally know someone who is transgender. According to the Pew Research Center, public opinion has been steadily shifting towards support for same-sex marriage, with 62 percent in favour as of 2017. That group included two-thirds of Catholics and 68 percent of white mainline Protestants. Among white evangelical Protestants, the percentage supporting same-sex marriages jumped from 27 percent in 2016 to 35 percent the following year.<sup>27</sup>

**26** Abigail Geiger and Gretchen Livingston, 'Eight Facts about Love and Marriage in America', *Fact Tank: News in Numbers*, 13 February 2019, <http://pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/13/8-facts-about-love-and-marriage/>.

**27** Geiger and Livingston, 'Eight Facts about

The 2017 *American Values Atlas* also reported growing support for same-sex marriage and declining religious resistance. Among young adults age 18 to 29, 77 percent were in favour of legalizing same-sex marriage.<sup>28</sup> The church is struggling with the concept of LGBTQ inclusion. Many Christian denominations have affirmed same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ clergy.

In January 2018, a symposium involving a diverse group of Christian leaders was held to discuss the challenges facing the church. The participants agreed that a proper understanding of sex, gender, gender identity and gender dysphoria would continue to be a pressing concern. Charles Taylor stated, 'Christian belief has not only been displaced from the default position, but is aggressively contested by numerous other options.' He suggested that the church is in a position to reimagine its social, cultural and political witness to the secular world.<sup>29</sup>

The prevalent view of the church's apparent lack of influence within the present culture is a symptom of a sick church. Healing of this sickness must begin from within, with a reaffirmation of the church's responsibility and capacity to speak truth, empowered by the Spirit. Cathi Herrod stated at

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Love and Marriage in America'.

**28** Alex Vandermaas-Peeler, Daniel Cox, Molly Fisch-Friedman, Rob Griffin and Robert P. Jones, 'Emerging Consensus on LGBT Issues: Findings From the 2017 American Values Atlas', 1 May 2018, [www.prri.org/research](http://www.prri.org/research).

**29** John Stonestreet, 'Challenges Facing the Church in 2018: A BreakPoint Symposium', 11 January 2018, <http://breakpoint.org/author/stonestreet>.

the 2018 symposium that the 'lack of a unified voice coupled with so many departing from biblical fidelity hinders efforts to model a different path to a culture in desperate need of clarity, civility, and leadership.'<sup>30</sup> Clarity is precisely what our present culture, both locally and globally, needs desperately.

### VIII. Conclusion

'Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently' (Gal 6:1). Those who feel isolated in the body of Christ due to their sexual desires need affirmation, not of their temptations but rather of God's grace, mercy, love and redemptive power in Christ Jesus. The church has a mandate to spread the good news and, in doing so, to receive all persons with humbleness and graciousness, regardless of their gender, race or sexual preferences. However, the teachings of the church must never be entangled with cultural practices. God's word never changes and His creation of the family structure is and forever will be according to His will and purposes. Furthermore, the very foundation of human anthropology and human sexuality establishes theological parameters and provides imperative lessons for godly living. If these lessons are ignored within the church, the secular culture will advance its ideology without opposition.

It is essential for the church to guard the family unit and uphold it as an institution that fulfils God's purpose. To accomplish this, God's

whole message, which includes sexuality, must become a vital portion of the church's teaching. Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea, stated, 'We cannot become like God unless we have knowledge of Him, and without lessons there will be no knowledge.'<sup>31</sup> Human anthropology and human sexuality must be regarded as part of God's creation and lived out in submission to God's will. The following guidelines are offered as a possible plan of action:

1. Prayer and fasting among church leaders of all denominations, with the purpose of recommitting to God's word and for strengthening and encouragement to remain true to the faith (Acts 14:21–24).
2. Humbly confess the infiltration of cultural norms into the church and pledge to renew the covenant to follow the Lord and keep His commands by the grace of God (2 Kings 23:1–3).
3. Empower the church by teaching in spirit and truth, with a focus on forgiveness, redemption, restoration, abiding in Christ, and Christ as our source of life.
4. Focus on understanding that 'the old man' has been crucified with Christ and on the spiritual truth of the new life in Christ Jesus, which does not result simply in modified behaviour but in a new heart and mind, empowered through the

<sup>30</sup> Stonestreet, 'Challenges Facing the Church in 2018'.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher A. Hall, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 104.

indwelling Holy Spirit to conform to Jesus rather than to the world. This emphasis is especially powerful for those who are struggling in their own power to change.

5. Put on the full armour of God (Eph 6:10–17) against the lures and enticements of the secular culture, so as to fight against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Be aware of what is acceptable in popular culture so that you can counter it with truth, teaching a spiritual message applicable to living according to God's word.
6. Teach all ages, in an age-appropriate manner; the wisdom of the Lord on theological anthropology and sexuality. Laying a foundation of godly principles in children will give them spiritual armaments against the lies of the world. They will be sanctified by the truth.
7. In teaching and preaching, be ever mindful that the Scriptures should be understood as they point to Jesus (Lk 24:27), the interpretive key to the Bible. Watchman Nee states, 'Any true experience of value in the sight of God must have been reached by way of

a new discovery of the meaning of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus. ... Paul makes everything depend upon such a discovery in Romans 6:6, "Knowing this, our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away, that so we should no longer be in bondage to sin."<sup>32</sup>

8. Focus on the peace of Christ Jesus that covers people through their struggles and allow God to work in them according to His timing. Do not impose man's timing on God's work.
9. Do all things in the fruit of the Spirit and allow love to motivate and guide you.

Today's culture is desperate for truth and clarity. The church must maintain the light for which it was called, for believers to follow and for non-believers to ponder and receive. The greatest threat to the church and the family may not be modern culture or even the Emerging Church, but spiritual slumber. There is a saying among our youth that seems very appropriate to this situation: 'Wake up and stay woke!'

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<sup>32</sup> Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1977). 55–56.

# The Rejection of God's Natural Moral Law: Losing the Soul of Western Civilization

Thomas K. Johnson

The rejection of God's natural moral law in Protestant theology in the twentieth century is, in my assessment, one crucial reason why Christians lost the battle for the soul of Western civilization. We theologians disarmed God's people on the eve of the battle with exclusive secularism, so our people did not know how to address the public square about such diverse questions as sexuality, human rights or education without giving the impression that a person or a society must first follow Jesus to know the difference between right and wrong.

In previous centuries, Christian theologians, both Catholics and Protestants, had claimed in various ways that God's moral law was present within human nature, conscience, or reason, so that all people can know the difference between right and wrong, even if that natural moral knowledge might be limited or distorted. However, this claim was denied by some of the most influential Protestant voices of the twentieth century.

The rejection of natural-law ethics and general revelation was part of a well-intended attempt to purify Protestantism from its subordination to beliefs arising from Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philoso-

phy. The people who rejected God's natural moral law were all seeking a renewed Protestant theology, ethics, and church that would be more deeply rooted in God's revelation in Christ and Scripture and no longer extensively compromised by purely secular ideas. However, the loss occasioned by this attempted intellectual repentance and self-purification was massive. In this essay we will consider the rejection of the natural moral law and its implications for public life, using the Holocaust as an example.

'Culture Protestantism' was a term used by European (mostly German-speaking) neo-orthodox theologians such as Karl Barth and Helmut Thielicke to describe the liberal European Protestant theology of the previous century. Some of the prominent writers described by this term were Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl, Wilhelm Herrmann and Adolf von Harnack. All these theologians, though they held various convictions, reframed the Protestant faith as primarily pious feelings and moral values while de-emphasizing such Christian doctrines as the Trinity, the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus, or the holiness of God.

Within the German-speaking coun-

tries, Karl Barth led the way in calling for a renewed theology of the Word of God that rejected the dominance of the Enlightenment (as reflected in Culture Protestantism). However, Barth did not sufficiently appreciate the fact that Culture Protestantism was not only a rejection of key elements of standard Christian belief; it was also a rejection of God's universal moral law and always inclined towards moral relativism. Neither European neo-orthodoxy nor American fundamentalism recovered this part of the Christian heritage in response to liberal Protestantism.

Karl Barth's rejection of natural law and general revelation as acceptable themes in Protestant theology and ethics was not his theological priority, but he nevertheless had great influence in this regard. Most other Protestant thinkers who took similar positions were either followers of Barth or influenced by the climate of opinion that he shaped. After looking at Barth, we will consider two such people: Helmut Thielicke and Evan Runner.

### I. Karl Barth (1886–1968)

'Human righteousness is, as we have seen, in itself an illusion: there is in this world no observable righteousness. There may, however, be a righteousness before God, a righteousness that comes from Him.'<sup>1</sup> With such words Barth rejected the synthesis of Christianity with European culture and philosophy, a synthesis that he

viewed as dating back at least to Friedrich Schleiermacher and which, he claimed, led to the religious endorsement of nationalism and militarism, such as that seen in the initially widespread Christian support for Hitler and National Socialism.<sup>2</sup>

Barth was not so much addressing a single theological issue as questioning a pattern of relating the Christian faith to Western culture, namely Culture Protestantism.<sup>3</sup> As Barth saw it, this pattern reduced Christianity to being the religious component or dimension of the best principles of Western civilization, such that Christian beliefs were interpreted, evaluated and accepted on the basis of ideas coming from Western culture. In other words, Barth thought Western Christianity had capitulated to the Enlightenment.

Barth's comments on Schleiermacher typify this assessment. According to Schleiermacher, 'The most authentic work of Christianity is making culture the triumph of the Spirit over nature, while being a Christian is the peak of a fully cultured conscious-

2 See Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices: The Social Ethics of Barth, Brunner, and Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 18–44; Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church's Confession under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962); Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985); and Will Herberg, 'The Social Philosophy of Karl Barth', in *Community, State and Church: Three Essays by Karl Barth*, ed. Will Herberg (New York: Anchor Books, 1960).

3 On Culture Protestantism, see C. J. Curtis, *Contemporary Protestant Thought* (New York: Bruce Publishing Company, 1970), 97–103.

1 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated from the sixth edition by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), 75.

ness. The kingdom of God, according to Schleiermacher, is totally and completely identical with the progress of culture.' Further, for Schleiermacher, according to Barth, the 'existence of churches is really an "element that is necessary for the development of the human spirit."' <sup>4</sup>

Barth summarizes his own position in contrast to Schleiermacher when he suggests that real theologians 'should seek the secret of Christianity beyond all culture'.<sup>5</sup> Barth declares that God stands over against even the best in human culture as both Judge and Redeemer.

A crucial part of this subordination of Christianity to European culture, Barth claimed, was the doctrine of general revelation as held by natural theology, which seeks to prove the existence of God. Though Barth had been speaking out against natural theology for many years before the rise of National Socialism, Hitler's rise to power and the religious support Hitler received brought the issue to a head.

The question became a burning one at the moment when the Evangelical Church in Germany was unambiguously and consistently confronted by a definite and new form of natural theology, namely, by the demand to recognise in the political events of the year 1933, and especially in the form of the God-sent Adolf Hitler, a source of specific

new revelation of God, which, demanding obedience and trust, took its place beside the revelation attested in Holy Scripture, claiming it should be acknowledged by Christian proclamation and theology as equally binding and obligatory. ... [This would lead to] the transformation of the Christian Church into the temple of the German nature-and-history-myth.<sup>6</sup>

Barth did not want the immediate crisis of National Socialism to blind Christians to the broader problem of which the church's endorsement of Hitler was, in his opinion, merely a particular manifestation:

The same had already been the case in the developments of the preceding centuries. There can be no doubt that not merely a part but the whole had been intended and claimed when it had been demanded that side by side with its attestation in Jesus Christ and therefore in Holy Scripture the Church should also recognise and proclaim God's revelation in reason, in conscience, in the emotions, in history, in nature and in culture and its achievements and developments.<sup>7</sup>

Barth added, 'If it was admissible and right and perhaps even orthodox to combine the knowability of God in Jesus Christ with His knowability in nature, reason and history, the proc-

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert* (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946), 388. This book contains Barth's critique of the capitulation of Christianity to the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophy.

<sup>5</sup> Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie*, 388.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: A Selection*, trans. and ed. G. W. Bromiley (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 55. The quotation is from *Church Dogmatics* II,1.

<sup>7</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 55. See the excellent treatment in Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 115-34.

lamation of the Gospel with all kinds of other proclamations ... it is hard to see why the German Church should not be allowed to make its own particular use of the procedure.<sup>8</sup>

Barth saw the Barmen Confession (31 May 1934), of which he was the principal author, as not only a response to the particular problem of the German Christian movement that supported Hitler but also an attempt to purify the entire evangelical church of the problem of natural theology. Barmen forcefully rejects natural revelation: 'Jesus Christ, as He is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, whom we have to hear and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We condemn the false doctrine that the Church can and must recognise as God's revelation other events and powers, forms and truth, apart from and alongside this one Word of God.'<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to all claims that God could be encountered through natural theology, natural revelation, natural law or National Socialism, Barth proclaimed that God is known only through his Word, meaning Christ. Any other approach, he declared, reduced the Christian faith to a mere religious dimension of Western culture.

Barth's approach may be illustrated by his discussion of the traditional Protestant topic of the relation between law and gospel. He thought that sinful humans were very inclined

to give the title 'law of God' to demands that did not come from God at all. That is why he changed the traditional phrase 'law and gospel' to 'gospel and law'. 'Anyone who really and earnestly would first say Law and only then, presupposing this, say Gospel would not, no matter how good his intention, be speaking of the Law of God and therefore then certainly not *his* Gospel.'<sup>10</sup>

The order 'law and gospel', used by Protestants since the Reformation, assumed a revelation of God's law through creation that has an impact on human life before people accept the gospel.<sup>11</sup> But this order, Barth thought, risked giving the title 'law of God' to demands that came from the German people, the Führer or other false sources. To avoid this error, Barth referred to 'gospel and law' to emphasize that we know for sure that a law is from God only if it follows the gospel: 'We must first of all know about the Gospel in order to know about the Law, and not vice versa.'<sup>12</sup>

Finally, Barth contended that natural-law thinking robbed people of courage when they had to confront evil: 'All arguments based on natural law are Janus-headed. They do not lead to the light of clear decisions, but to misty twilight in which all cats become grey. They lead to—Munich.'<sup>13</sup>

8 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 57.

9 This is the first article of the Barmen Confession as quoted by Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 54. As far as I know, this is the only Protestant confession that denies that God reveals himself through creation, although some other confessions do not discuss God's general revelation at length.

10 Karl Barth, 'Gospel and Law', in Herberg, *Community, State and Church*, 71.

11 See Hans O. Tiefel, *The Ethics of Gospel and Law: Aspects of the Barth-Luther Debate*, Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1967.

12 Barth, 'Gospel and Law', 72. I have responded to Barth in 'Law and Gospel: The Hermeneutical and Homiletical Key to Reformation Theology and Ethics', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 43, no. 1 (2019): 53–70.

13 Herberg, *Community, State and Church*,



Barth's bold resistance of the Nazis, as he saw it, arose from his starting point in hearing the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. He thought any other basis for ethics, including natural law, led to moral compromise.

## II. Helmut Thielicke (1908–1986)

Thielicke's rejection of natural law broadly follows Barth, one of his first theology professors in the early 1930s; Thielicke also rejected both natural-law ethics and the capitulation by Western Christianity to the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment ideologies.<sup>14</sup> (Thielicke too was involved in the anti-Nazi movement among Protestant Christians in Germany during World War II.) Nevertheless, he added some considerations that merit separate discussion.

Whereas traditionally Protestants associated the Ten Commandments with the natural law, Thielicke associated them with 'natural lawlessness'.<sup>15</sup>

Noting the negative 'Thou shalt not' structure of many commandments, he claimed, 'There is within this negativity a protest against man as he actually is'.<sup>16</sup> This approach was in opposition, he contended, to natural-law conceptions, which 'can be assumed only on the presupposition that the fall has only a comparatively accidental but not an essential significance'.<sup>17</sup> 'Natural law and the Decalogue in fact belong to completely different worlds'.<sup>18</sup> For Thielicke, the Ten Commandments harshly confront and condemn our natural lawlessness.

This observation relates to Thielicke's critique of Culture Protestantism. Whereas 'The Decalogue is expressly set down within the context of a dialogue'<sup>19</sup> (meaning a dialogue with God in personal faith), natural law and Culture Protestantism conceive of moral decisions as being made by solitary egos, seeing God as the distant author of moral laws:

Culture Protestantism makes Christianity into a form of the world (*Weltgestalt*) in the sense that the commands of God—in-

49. In the Munich Agreement of 1938, France and Britain permitted the Nazi takeover of the Czech Sudetenland. This agreement became a watchword for the futility of appeasing totalitarianism.

14 Thielicke's critique of the capitulation of Christianity to the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought is found in *The Evangelical Faith* (hereafter *EF*), vol. 1: *Prolegomena: The Relation of Theology to Modern Thought Forms*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), and in *Modern Faith and Thought*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

15 Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics* (hereafter *TE*), vol. 1: *Foundations*, trans. and ed. William H. Lazareth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, rpt. 1984), 444. The material about Thielicke is broadly dependent on my Ph.D.

dissertation, *Helmut Thielicke's Ethics of Law and Gospel* (University of Iowa, 1987). Representing the traditional Protestant view, John Calvin claimed that natural law, 'which we have above described as written, even engraved, upon the hearts of all, in a sense asserts the very same things that are to be learned from the two Tables'. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II.vii.1. This connection of God's natural law with the Ten Commandments is present in most of the Reformers.

16 Thielicke, *TE*, 1:441.

17 Thielicke, *TE*, 1:443.

18 Thielicke, *TE*, 1:444.

19 Thielicke, *TE*, 1:442.

cluding the command to love one's neighbour—are detached from the divine *auctor legis* and from the relationship of decision and faith with this author. One could also say that Culture Protestantism tends to separate the second table of the law from the first Commandment ('I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods besides me') and then represents the individual commandments as maxims of Christian behaviour.<sup>20</sup>

Thielicke thought that as soon as the commands of God are separated from their source, they undergo a change of meaning that leaves them significantly different from what they were intended to be. Specifically, biblical moral prescriptions fall prey to ideological perversion once they are separated from God. For example, he thought the maxim 'the interests of the group come before the interests of the individual' could be a legitimate application of the biblical love command. But it was also used by the Nazis in their terrible ideology.

Thielicke similarly saw in the early works of Karl Marx a secularized expression of Christian love, but once this love command was separated from its source and integrated into the system of historical materialism, its meaning was substantially changed.<sup>21</sup> A moral theory that allows the independence of a moral command from God risks serious ideological per-

version. 'Only the one who stands in personal contact with the Lord of the First Commandment, as one who has been called and who follows, recognizes that the commands of God are something "wholly other."'<sup>22</sup>

Thielicke took a correspondingly new, anti-natural law direction in interpreting the Sermon on the Mount:

The harsh and apparently alien aspect of the Sermon on the Mount is its true point. It makes its demands with no regard for constitutional factors such as the impulses or for the limitations imposed on my personal will by autonomous structures. ... It does not claim me merely in a sphere of personal freedom. It thus compels me to identify myself with my total I. Hence I have to see in the world, not merely the creation of God, but also the structural form of human sin, i.e., its suprapersonal form, the 'fallen' world. ... I have to confess that I myself have fallen, and that what I see out there is the structural objectification of my fall.<sup>23</sup>

Whereas Culture Protestants, natural-law theorists, and 'German Christians' generally saw societal structures as the result of creation, perhaps calling them 'creation orders', Thielicke saw them as resulting from the Fall.<sup>24</sup> Other views, he

<sup>22</sup> Thielicke, *Kirche*, 45, 46.

<sup>23</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *EF*, vol. 2: *The Doctrine of God and of Christ*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 248.

<sup>24</sup> In Europe during the mid-twentieth century, the term 'German Christians' referred to the Christians who actively, sometimes vehemently, supported Hitler's policies. In German they were called '*die Deutsche Christen*'

<sup>20</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Kirche und Öffentlichkeit: Zur Grundlegung einer lutherischen Kulturethik* (Tubingen: Furche Verlag, 1947), 44.

<sup>21</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Vernunft und Existenz bei Lessing: Das Unbedingte in der Geschichte* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 49.

claimed, resulted from minimizing the total demand of God encountered in the Sermon on the Mount and left people without a complete sense of responsibility for all their actions.

Thielicke's discussion of the problem of 'autonomous norms' recalls Barth's concern for granting moral authority as the 'law of God' to a norm that does not deserve such a noble classification:

Since Kant the fact is known and deeply rooted in our thinking that the individual spheres of life are endowed with their autonomous norms. He imputed this autonomous structure principally to the spheres of meaning of the ethical, the esthetical and the theoretical. More recently one has learned to reckon with the autonomy of all the historical spheres of life; one knows of the autonomy of the state, of economic life, of law and of politics. One grants each of these historical spheres an autonomous structure because it is endowed with a constituting principle, from which all its proper functions can be derived.<sup>25</sup>

Because people think there are 'immanent principles which so control the processes involved as to make them proceed automatically',<sup>26</sup> people say business is business, art is art, politics is politics. Even responsible people talk and act as if each sphere of life and society has its own natural laws that carry validity and authority

regardless of any moral principles or ethical rules coming from an outside source, whether that source is God, the Bible or the church. Thielicke denies the validity of these autonomous norms, viewing them as an expression of our fallenness. They are structural expressions of sin, not creation orders in which we encounter a God-given natural moral law. And if one of these immanent principles is absolutized or idolized, secular ideologies such as National Socialism or Communism result.<sup>27</sup>

Thielicke claimed that all natural-law theories of ethics made two crucial assumptions: (1) there exists a perceptible order of existence that can be traced back to creation; (2) human reason is largely untouched by sin, so all people can perceive this moral order.<sup>28</sup> Thielicke rejected both assumptions, arguing that human reason cannot discern the good without revelation because it is too distorted by sin to engage in reliable ethical evaluation.<sup>29</sup>

Thielicke called for a purification of Protestant ethics from notions of natural law, similar to the Reformation's purification of Protestant theology from conceptions of salvation by works. 'Man's incapacity to justify

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*Bewegung*' or simply 'Deutsche Christen'.

<sup>25</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Geschichte und Existenz: Grundlegung einer evangelischen Gesellschaftstheologie* (Gütersloh: Verlag C. Bertelsmann, 1935), 46.

<sup>26</sup> Thielicke, *TE*, 2:71.

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<sup>27</sup> Thielicke, *TE*, 2:72. A similar discussion of the topic of autonomous norms appears in Danish thinker N. H. Soe, *Christliche Ethik* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1957). The similarity of the discussions by two thinkers influenced by Barth suggests that this assessment of societal structures flows from the basic lines of Barth's theology.

<sup>28</sup> *TE*, 1:388.

<sup>29</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Theologische Ethik*, vol. 2 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1955), 371–83. His 'Theological Critique of Reason' does not appear in the English edition.

himself by good works is logically to be augmented by, or integrated with, a similar incapacity truly to know the will and commandment of God.<sup>30</sup> For him, all Protestant ethics should be only an ethics of justification by faith alone, with no place for any notion of natural law.

### III. H. Evan Runner (1916–2002)

H. Evan Runner was a North American follower of the 'Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea', crafted by the Dutch Protestant thinker Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977). This movement was not directly influenced by Barth or Thielicke, but it had important similarities. Dooyeweerd and his followers were sharply critical of the medieval synthesis of the biblical and classical traditions, arguing that it furthered the secularization of Europe and North America. They also rejected any synthesis of Christian beliefs with Enlightenment or post-Enlightenment philosophy, suspecting that it had contributed to the two world wars.

In an unpublished 1957 speech, 'The Development of Calvinism in North America on the Background of Its Development in Europe', Runner argued that Christians should completely reject natural-law theory. Runner traced this theory to the deist philosophy of Lord Herbert of Cherbury

(1583–1648), especially his book *De Veritate* (1624). As the Thirty Years' War was devastating Europe, Herbert advocated a 'universal' religion and law that could overcome the conflicts between people. Obviously, this proposal deprived Christianity of its distinctiveness.

A year later came Hugo Grotius's *De Jure Belli et Pacis* (1625). According to Runner, Grotius sharply distinguished the law of God from the law of nature. Although Grotius believed in the law of God, he thought the foundation of public life should be the law of nature. These ideas were developed a generation later by Samuel Pufendorf, who also sharply distinguished between divine revelation and natural law. Thus, Runner argued, a whole new outlook developed that was contrary to the Reformation faith. Man was no longer seen as a covenantal being whose meaning is found in relation to God, but as a rational-moral being who has within himself a proper guide to life and the ability to act according to this guide. As Runner stated, 'Such men did not hesitate to leave Revelation and the Kingdom of Christ to the private lives of those who showed some concern for these matters', yet they 'took up with unfailing confidence the building of the Kingdom of Man on Earth. Communism is one form of the general pattern.'

In this way, Runner saw the medieval dualistic scheme of nature and grace seeping back into Protestant lands, with disastrous results. The medieval synthesis, he believed, was really an attempt to hold on to pagan philosophy in the realm of nature while adding Christian beliefs in the restricted realm of grace or 'supernature'. Runner criticized the Reformers

<sup>30</sup> TE, 1:326. What Thielicke says here can be seen as a development of related themes in Barth. See Barth, 'No!' in *Natural Theology: Comprising 'Nature and Grace' by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply 'No!' by Dr. Karl Barth*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946), 97.

for not more completely replacing the medieval nature-grace framework with a more authentic evangelical philosophy. In his reading, the theology of Luther's colleague at the University of Wittenberg, Phillip Melanchthon (1497–1560), already showed signs of capitulation to the medieval framework, which made revelation and the Christian faith irrelevant to such areas of life as law, politics and business, thereby contributing to the secularization of Western culture. Natural-law theories, whether Protestant or Catholic, were an important part of nature-grace dualism for Runner and should therefore be rejected.<sup>31</sup>

#### IV. Assessment

We have seen three related reasons for rejecting general revelation and natural law within Protestantism. For Barth, natural law is part of the natural theology that reduced the Christian faith to the religious dimension of Western culture and lost sight of the otherness of God, leaving Christianity hopelessly compromised in relation to Western civilization (especially represented by National Socialism) and unequipped to stand against society in prophetic criticism. Thielicke developed this argument, claiming that human reason is so heavily shaped by sin that it cannot derive any reliable moral norms from the structure of human life. Along a different line, Runner rejected natural law as part of the nature-grace dualism that contributed to the destructive

secularization of Western civilization.

Barth, Thielicke and Runner should all be appreciated for advancing a purification of Western Christianity that was deeply rooted in God's revelation in Christ and scripture. But the weakness of this line of thought becomes apparent when one asks, 'Could the soldiers of Hitler's Third Reich have known that it was morally wrong to march trainloads of Jews and others into the concentration camps?' The soldiers had orders from the German High Command, and the Nazi-led government had rewritten German laws to make those orders legal. Therefore, the soldiers were following the rule of law. Did those soldiers have a basis on which to say, 'This is wrong!' and to refuse to obey orders?

According to the Barth-Thielicke-Runner line of argument, there is no clear answer. If the soldiers recognized the authority of Jesus or the Bible, then they should have perceived the wrongness of their actions; but if they did not, based on these theories, then neither their rationality nor their conscience had access to a higher moral law on the basis of which they should disobey orders. Though Barth and Thielicke risked their lives to speak and write brilliantly against the Nazis, their philosophy would have left them unable to tell non-Christian soldiers, 'You know this is wrong'.

This theological weakness cost Western civilization its soul. The Protestant churches were left saying to their neighbors, more or less, 'We know it is wrong to participate in genocide, but we are not sure if you can know that it is wrong to participate in genocide.' Rather than saying something clear and constructive about how everyone, regardless of their faith identity, can know something

<sup>31</sup> Other philosophers influenced by Dooyeweerd reconfigured natural-law theory instead of rejecting it. See Thomas K. Johnson, *Natural Law Ethics* (Bonn: VKW, 2005), 116–24.

about right and wrong, Protestants applied ethics only to Christians.

Elsewhere I have assessed how this theological situation pushed Christians in two opposite directions: either an ethics of holiness that applied biblical principles within the Christian communities, or an ethics of domination that attempted to reassert the claims of Christian ethics on secular society, whether as a call for a 'Christian America' or a 'Christian Europe'.<sup>32</sup> Both of these directions largely communicated the same message to our neighbours of other faiths or no faith: 'We are not sure if you can know it is wrong to practice genocide unless you first start to follow Jesus.' By the mistaken character of what they communicated about ethics, Protestant churches accidentally promoted exclusive secularism and moral nihilism, thereby cutting the heart out of the West.

The primary solution is not a new claim about the power of human reason to prove right and wrong (or the existence of God), though the proper use of rationality is a gift of God that should be developed with discipline. The primary solution is to see that in the Bible, God is described as constantly revealing his moral law to all humanity as part of his general revelation (which is distinct from the special revelation of the gospel). Because of what God is constantly doing, people generally know that genocide is wrong, even if they are committing it. We can say the same about other terrible evils, even if we cannot yet fully explain how God reveals his natural moral law or how people learn about right and wrong.<sup>33</sup>

Such a theological change could revolutionize what our churches communicate about ethics to the world around us. We could ask a soldier participating in genocide, 'How might you find the courage to do what you know is right, even if it costs your life?' Christian communications about ethics must assume that people, regardless of their faith, already know something about right and wrong; we can then discuss how they know this and what this knowledge implies about God and human nature. Of course, one must also be prepared to apply the gospel of forgiveness.

Karl Barth and Helmut Thielicke were right to reject Culture Protestantism and the subordination of Christianity to secular thought. Evan Runner was right to reject some Enlightenment views regarding natural law. But rather than removing God's general revelation and natural moral law from our theology and ethics, we need to reconfigure them. For they represent what God is doing, not what humanity is doing. The Creator is active in his creation, even if all of unbelieving life, thought and culture is involved in suppressing the unavoidable knowledge of God and his moral law. But even suppressed knowledge, if it comes from God, is still effective knowledge. Once we recognize this, we will be better equipped to talk about serious matters with our unbelieving neighbours and introduce the gospel of Christ as revealed in Scripture. Perhaps in this way God might restore the soul of Western civilization.

32 Johnson, *Natural Law Ethics*, 7–14.

33 For more see Thomas K. Johnson, *The*

*First Step in Missions Training: How Our Neighbors Are Wrestling with God's General Revelation* (Bonn: WEA, 2014).

# Can Evangelicals Support Christian Zionism?

Gerald R. McDermott

The standard narrative about Christian Zionism describes it as a result of bad exegesis and zany theology. Although many scholars concede that the Hebrew Bible is clearly Zionist (that is, that its primary focus is on a covenant with a particular people and land, both called Israel, with the land sometimes being called Zion), they typically insist that the New Testament drops this focus on a particular land and people and replaces it with a universal vision for all peoples across the globe. *Eretz Yisrael* (Hebrew for 'the land of Israel') is said to be replaced by *ge* (Greek for 'land' or 'earth'), which is usually translated as 'the whole earth'. Concern for Jews as Jews is seen as absent from the New Testament, except to insist that there is no longer any significant difference between Jew and Greek (Gal 3:28). Hence, neither the land nor the people of Israel have any special significance after the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

According to this narrative, the only people who have advocated for the idea that the New Testament maintains concern for the particular land and people of Israel are premillennial dispensationalists. Traditional dispensationalist theology has often put Israel and the church on two dif-

ferent tracks, which do not run at the same time, and often holds to elaborate schedules of end-time events including a rapture. This approach, developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is thought to be the origin and essence of all Christian Zionism.

Yet Christian Zionism is actually at least eighteen centuries older than dispensationalism. Its vision is rooted in the Hebrew Bible, where covenant is the central story, and at the heart of the covenant is the promise of a land. God took the initiative to call a particular people to himself, and then to promise and eventually deliver a land to this people. God drove this people off their land twice, but even in exile his prophets declared that the land was still theirs. The Jews who wrote the New Testament kept this vision in the background, with the inauguration of the church in the foreground.

## I. Biblical Evidence

Just as the Hebrew Bible envisioned blessings going to the whole world through the people of this land, so too the New Testament proclaimed a blessing for the whole world coming through the Jewish messiah, whose kingdom started in Israel and would

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eventually be centred once again in Israel. These New Testament writers held on to the prophets' promises that the Jews of the Diaspora would return to the land from all over the world, establishing there a *politeia* (political entity), which one day would be transformed into a centre of blessing for the world.

Anti-Zionists concede that the Old Testament prophets, usually writing from exile, predicted a return to the land. But many of them say these prophecies of return were fulfilled when the Babylonian exiles returned to rebuild Jerusalem towards the end of the sixth century BC.

Yet there is remarkable evidence that Jesus looked to a *future* return and a restored Jerusalem. In Matthew 24, he says that when the Son of Man returns, 'all the tribes of the land will mourn,' quoting Zechariah's prophecy about the inhabitants of Jerusalem mourning when 'the Lord will give salvation to the tents of Judah' (Zech 12:7, 10). In Matthew 19:28, Jesus tells his disciples that 'in the new world ... you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the *twelve tribes* of Israel.' E. P. Sanders observed in *Jesus and Judaism* that these repeated references to the twelve tribes imply the restoration of Israel, particularly in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Luke records Anna speaking of the baby Jesus 'to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem' (Lk 2:38), along with Jesus' expectation that when he returned Israel would welcome him: 'You will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"'

(Lk 13:34–35). Luke suggests that the return will be in Jerusalem (Lk 21:24–28).

When Jesus' disciples asked Jesus just before his ascension, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' (Acts 1:6), Jesus did not challenge their assumption that one day the kingdom would be restored to physical Israel. He simply said that the Father had set the date and that they did not need to know it yet. These sorts of indications in the gospels and Acts caused Oxford historian Markus Bockmuehl to write that 'the early Jesus movement evidently continued to focus upon the restoration of Israel's twelve tribes in a new messianic kingdom.'<sup>2</sup>

Paul, Peter and the writer of the book of Revelation had similar expectations. Paul used Isaiah 59's prophecy of restoration to declare that 'all Israel will be saved' at the end of history, when 'the deliverer will come from Zion, [and] he will banish ungodliness from Jacob' (Rom 11:26). In Acts 3, Peter looked forward to 'the times of restoration of all things which God spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from ancient time' (Acts 3:21). The word Peter uses for 'restoration' is the same word (*apokatastasis*) used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which the early church used as its Bible) for God's future return of Jews from all over the world to Israel.

In Revelation, the Lamb stands 'on Mount Zion' in the final stage of history (14:1), and the new earth is centred in Jerusalem, which has twelve gates

2 Markus Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakhah and the Beginning of Christian Public Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), xi.

1 E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 98.



named after 'the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel' (Rev 21:2, 12). In chapter 11, the nations 'trample' upon 'the holy city for forty-two months'. What city is this? It is the one 'where their Lord was crucified' (11:2, 8). This will take place before or during the time when 'the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ' (v. 15). So in the time of the new heavens and the new earth, that new earth is to be centred in Jerusalem and filled with markers of Jewish presence in the land of Israel.

Paul has long been cast as the apostle to the Gentiles, the man who supposedly took the focus off Judaism and showed that the gospel was really a universal message for all. According to this view of Paul's theology, Paul believed that the days of Jewish particularity were over and that the days of non-Jewish universalism had begun. God's covenant with the Jews was over, these interpreters claim, and he has transferred that covenant to the church. No longer was God concerned with the Jews, who had forfeited their covenant because they had rejected the messiah, Jesus.

This is what Christian theologian Kendall Soulen has termed the 'punitive' version of supersessionism, the idea that God made a new covenant with the church that supersedes his old covenant with Israel because he was punishing Israel for not accepting her messiah. Soulen's two other kinds of supersessionism are 'economic' (in God's economy or administration of the history of salvation, Israel's purpose was to prepare for the messiah, and so once he came, Israel had no more purpose) and 'structural' (the history of salvation is structured so as not to need Israel in any integral way, except to serve as a negative

example).<sup>3</sup>

Although Paul has been read in this way for centuries, his letters tell a different story. In Romans 9 and 11, he laments his fellow Jews who have not accepted Jesus as messiah, saying that they cause him 'great sorrow and unceasing anguish' (9:2). Yet he says 'the covenants' still 'belong' to them (9:4), and even though they have become 'enemies of the gospel', they still 'are beloved' because of their 'election', which is 'irrevocable' (11:28–29).

Galatians is the letter most commonly used to prove that Paul has dispensed with Jewish law in favour of a church that has left Israel behind. Yet even here he says the gospel is all about 'the blessing of Abraham ... com[ing] to the Gentiles' (3:14) because 'the promises [of blessing] were made to Abraham and to his offspring' (3:16), so that becoming saved means being in Abraham's family: 'If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise' (3:29). In other words, the gospel means getting connected to Israel's history, not getting away from it. Supersessionism suggests that Israel has been left behind; Galatians says otherwise.

We find the same pattern in Revelation, which is usually dated near the end of the first century. As we have already seen, John writes that the new earth is centred in Jerusalem, whose twelve gates are inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel (21:12). It appears, then, that a Zionist vision continued in the New Testa-

3 Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996).

ment church through at least the end of the first century.

## II. Early Christian Interpretations

These are only a few of the many signs of Zionism in the New Testament, which is why early Christians continued to expect a future for Israel as a people and land.

Justin Martyr (100–165), one of the best-known second-century Christian writers, expected that the millennium would be centred in Jerusalem. Although he was one of the first replacement theologians (thinking that the church replaced Israel in some sense), his vision of the church's future included a particular city in the particular land of Israel:

But I and others, who are right-minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned and enlarged, [as] the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare. (*Dialogue with Trypho*, chapters 80 and 81)

Tertullian (160–c. 225) also saw a future for the people and land of Israel. Although he derided the Jews' ignorance in putting Jesus to death and thought that God had punished them by tearing 'from [their] throat[s] ... the very land of promise,' he believed that they would one day be returned to their land:

It will be fitting for the Christian to rejoice, and not to grieve, at the restoration of Israel, if it be true, (as it is), that the whole of our hope is intimately united with the remaining expectation of Israel.

(*On Modesty*, chapter 8)

A bit later in the third century, the Egyptian bishop Nepos, who according to Robert Wilken 'was a respected and admired Christian leader', foresaw a restoration of Jerusalem and rebuilding of the temple. Millennial teaching was prevalent in that area of third-century Egypt and had been so for a long time, along with, presumably, faith in a restored Israel.<sup>4</sup>

This early-church Zionism came screeching to a halt with Origen (184–254), who regarded the relationship between the Jewish messiah and the promise of the land as a zero-sum game. Either one or the other could be fulfilled, not both. In Wilken's words, 'If Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the prophecies about the messianic age had already been fulfilled, and it was the task of biblical interpreters to discover what the spiritual promises meant in light of this new "fact." ' So Jerusalem did 'not designate a future political centre but a spiritual vision of heavenly bliss.' When the psalmist said 'the meek shall possess the land', Origen thought he meant the 'pure land in the pure heaven', not somewhere on planet Earth.<sup>5</sup>

Augustine was willing to call soil taken from Israel 'holy land', but he spiritualized the promises of land in a way similar to Origen. Once Augustine's amillennial eschatology became accepted in the medieval church, with its assertion that the millennium is simply the rule of Christ through the

4 Robert L. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 76–77, drawing on Eusebius, *The History of the Church* 7.24 and other sources.

5 Wilken, *Land Called Holy*, 70, 72, 77–78.

church, few medieval thinkers saw a future for the people or land of Israel. All Old Testament prophecies of future Israel were interpreted as predictions of the Christian church that came into existence after the resurrection of Christ.

### III. Post-Reformation Views

But the Reformation's return to the plain sense of the biblical text restored confidence that there could be a future role for a particular Israel, as both a people and a land, even while Christian salvation was offered to the whole world. Pietists and Puritans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries became convinced from Old Testament prophecies and Paul's writings that Jews would return to their land and would eventually be converted to Christian faith.

Long before the rise of dispensationalism in the nineteenth century, Protestants in a variety of churches foresaw a role for a particular Zion in times before the end. Then, after the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel in 1948, both Catholic and Protestant theologians recognized from Romans 11 that the rise of the church did not end God's continuing covenant with Israel. As theologians brought new focus on that covenant, many came to see that the land was integral to it.

Many in the Reformed tradition would take exception to this approach. They have usually taught that the Church *supersedes* Israel without remainder, so that the non-Jesus-accepting people of Israel and their little territory on the Mediterranean are no longer theologically significant to God. Nor, they conclude, should they be significant to evangelical and Re-

formed Christians.

After all, John Calvin wrote that because the Jews did not 'reciprocate' as willing partners in God's covenant, 'they deserve to be repudiated' (*Institutes* 4.2.3). There is only one covenant for Calvin, and so the New Covenant did not replace the Old, but rather the church is the new recipient of the Old Testament promises made to Jewish Israel. There is no continuing corporate election of Israel, only the election of individual Israelites who accept Christ (*Institutes* 3.21.6). Therefore, after Jesus' resurrection there could be no future for the people or land of Israel that would make any theological difference.

Beginning at the end of the sixteenth century, however, some of Calvin's theological descendants, mostly Puritans, followed a different approach. They took seriously the Reformation's emphasis on the plain sense of the Bible and therefore distinguished between promises made to Jewish Israel and those made to the new Gentile Israel. Thomas Draxe (d. 1618), a disciple of the Puritan theologian William Perkins, used Romans 11 and biblical prophecies to argue that Jesus would not come again until 'the dispersed Jewes generally converted to Christianitie', but that in the meantime they 'would be temporally restored into their owne Country, [would] rebuild Jerusalem, and have a most reformed, and flourishing, Church and Commonwealth'.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Draxe, *An Alarum to the Last Judgement* (London: Nicholas Oakes and Matthew Law, 1615), 22, 74–77. The best analysis of seventeenth-century Zionism among Puritans is Robert O. Smith, *More Desired Than Our Owne Salvation: The Roots of Christian Zionism* (New York: Oxford Univer-

In his commentary on the book of Revelation, published posthumously in 1611, Thomas Brightman (1562–1607) wrote that Jews were the ‘kings of the east’ in Revelation 16:12 who would destroy Islam. He was certain they would be restored to the land of Zion: ‘Shal they returne agayn to Jerusalem? There is nothing more sure: the Prophets plainly confirme it, and beat often upon it.’<sup>7</sup>

Henry Finch (c. 1558–1625), a member of Parliament and strong advocate of Puritan causes, rejected the ascription of all Old Testament promises to the gentile Church:

Where *Israel, Iudah, Tsion, Ierusalem*, &c. are named in this argument, the Holy Ghost meaneth not the spirituall Israel, or Church of God collected of the Gentiles, no nor of the Iewes and Gentiles both (for each of these have their promises severally and apart) but Israel properly descended out of *Iacobs* loynes.<sup>8</sup>

Joseph Mede (1586–1638) similarly advanced the oft-repeated Puritan conviction that the Jews would be restored to the land of Israel after the destruction of the Turkish empire. One of Mede’s students was John Milton, who in *Paradise Regained* wrote in 1670 of the return of the people of Israel to their ancient land:

Yet He at length, time to himself  
best known,  
Remembering Abraham, by some  
wondrous call  
May bring them back, repentant  
and sincere,  
And at their passing cleave the  
Assyrian flood,  
While to their native land with joy  
they haste,  
As the Red Sea and Jordan once  
he cleft,  
When to the Promised Land their  
fathers passed.  
To his due time and providence I  
leave them.

Increase Mather wrote in his *The Mystery of Israel’s Salvation* (1669) that the future conversion of ‘the Jewish Nation’ was ‘a truth of late [that] hath gained ground much throughout the world’. This widespread acceptance was a sign that the times of the end were near, a time when ‘the *Israelites* shall again possesse ... the Land promised unto their *Father Abraham*.’<sup>9</sup>

One of Mather’s theological innovations was his expectation that the Jews would regain their ancient land *before* they would convert. It would be only ‘after the *Israelites* shall be returned to their own Land again’ that the Holy Spirit would be poured out on them. Mather also warned against a supersessionist spiritualization of promises made to Israel: ‘Why should we unnecessarily refuse literal interpretations?’ Like Finch, Mather insisted that promises about earthly inheritance should not be spiritual-

sity Press, 2013), 69–94. This section follows his lead.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Brightman, *A Revelation of the Apocalyps* (Amsterdam: Hondius & Laurens, 1611), 440, quoted in Smith, *More Desired Than Our Owne Salvation*, 75.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Finch, *The Worlds Great Restauration, or, The Calling of the Iewes* (London: Edward Griffin and William Bladen, 1621), A2–A3, 5–6.

<sup>9</sup> Increase Mather, *Mystery of Israel’s Salvation* (London: John Allen, 1669), 43–44, 53–54.

ized away.<sup>10</sup>

Anglo-American Puritans in the Reformed tradition were not the only ones to depart from Calvin's version of supersessionism. At the turn of the eighteenth century, the Dutch Reformed theologian Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711) published a four-volume systematic theology that presented a more nuanced view of Jewish Israel. Brakel insisted that Paul's reference to 'all Israel' in Romans 11:25 had in mind Jewish Israel as a people with a distinct future. Brakel declared emphatically that Jews would return to the land:

Will the Jewish nation be gathered together again from all the regions of the world and from all the nations of the earth among which they have been dispersed? Will they come to and dwell in Canaan and all the lands promised to Abraham, and will Jerusalem be rebuilt? We believe that these events will transpire.<sup>11</sup>

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), perhaps the greatest Reformed theologian after Calvin, agreed with Brakel that Calvin's supersessionism used a hyper-spiritualist hermeneutic that rode roughshod over Scripture's plain sense. He agreed with Calvin that God had abandoned corporate Israel because their idolatry had moved him to jealousy, but he also argued that the divine abandonment would be temporary. There would be a second day of grace. Just before the millennium

commenced, God would remove the veil over their eyes and soften their hearts with grace, and all Israel will then be saved. 'Nothing is more certainly foretold than this national conversion of the Jews in the eleventh chapter of Romans', he wrote.<sup>12</sup>

Edwards determined that the Jews would return to their homeland. This was inevitable, he reasoned, because the prophecies of land being given to them had been only partly fulfilled. It was also necessary in order for God to make them a 'visible monument' of his grace and power at their conversion. At that moment religion and learning would be at their respective peaks, and Canaan once again would be a spiritual centre of the world. Although Israel would again be a distinct nation, Christians would have free access to Jerusalem because Jews would look on Christians as their brethren.<sup>13</sup>

It makes sense, Edwards wrote, that corporate redemption should follow the pattern of individual redemption—or, as he would put it, that there is harmony between corporate and individual redemption. In his *Blank Bible* he wrote that just as the 'restoration' of an individual at first involves only his soul but then later his body at the general resurrection, so too 'not only shall the spiritual state

<sup>10</sup> Mather, *Mystery*, 54, 56–57.

<sup>11</sup> Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), 4:530–31, accessed 4 January 2016, [www.abrakel.com/p/christians-reasonable-service.html](http://www.abrakel.com/p/christians-reasonable-service.html).

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *History of the Work of Redemption*, vol. 9 in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. John F. Wilson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989) 189, 469.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Blank Bible*, Edwards Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, 806; Edwards, *Apocalyptic Writings*, ed. Stephen J. Stein, vol. 5 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 135.

of the Jews be hereafter restored, but their external state as a nation in their own land ... shall be restored by [Christ].<sup>14</sup>

Edwards and his Puritan predecessors not only focused on the plain sense of Old Testament promises but also took notice of the wide range of suggestions in the New Testament (as enumerated in the 'Biblical Evidence' section of this paper) that the people and land of Israel would have a future.

The bottom line is that there has been significant diversity in Reformed interpretation of Israel. There is ample room in the tradition for Reformed interpreters to see a future for Jewish Israel and its land while at the same time affirming Calvin's insistence that the Church has inherited many of the promises made to Old Testament Israel.

#### IV. Law and Land: Two Different Promises

If the Reformed theologians cited in the previous section were right, then we might conclude that previous assumptions about Israel's land—that its importance was temporary, like that of the sacrificial system or what Christians have called the 'ceremonial law'—were wrong. On closer examination of the biblical text, we might realize that the Mosaic law, with its 'ceremonial' commands about worship, was a *sign* of the covenant, but that the land was part of the covenant *itself*. In God's very first statement to Abraham, the land was central: 'Go

from your country and your kindred and your father's house *to the land* that I will show you' (Gen 12:3).

The land continued to be at the heart of the biblical story: 'Of all the promises made to the patriarchs it was that of the land that was the most prominent and decisive.'<sup>15</sup> Elmer Martens estimated that *eretz* is the fourth most frequent noun or substantive in the Hebrew Bible, more dominant statistically than the idea of covenant.<sup>16</sup>

By my count, more than one thousand times in the Old Testament the land (*eretz*) of Israel is either stated or implied. Of the 250 times that covenant (*b'rit*) is mentioned, in seventy percent of those instances (177 times) covenant is either directly or indirectly connected to the land of Israel. Of the seventy-four times that *b'rit* appears in the Torah, seventy-three percent (or fifty-four occasions) include the gift of the land, either explicitly or implicitly.

According to the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 'Next to God himself, the longing for land dominates all others [in the Hebrew Bible].'<sup>17</sup> In other words, when the biblical God calls out a people for himself, he does so in an earthy way, by making the gift of a particular land an integral aspect of that calling.

But didn't the author of Hebrews make all this moot when he asserted

14 Jonathan Edwards, *The Blank Bible*, vol. 24 in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Stephen Stein (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 1028.

15 Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (London: Oliver and Boys, 1966), 79.

16 Elmer A. Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 97–98.

17 Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 487–88.

that the first covenant had been made 'obsolete' (Heb 8:13)? Not really. He was probably referring to the sacrificial system revealed through Moses, which Rome's destruction of the Temple in 70 AD had indeed brought to an end.

Hebrews moves directly from its statement of the first covenant being obsolete to a discussion of the tabernacle in the wilderness, where 'sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper' (Heb 9:1-2, 9). This reference to the tabernacle makes it clear that by 'covenant' the text means the Mosaic covenant, not the master covenant cut with Abraham. The land was God's principal gift in the master covenant with Abraham in Genesis, and this promise was never revoked. Jesus spoke of 'the blood of *the* covenant' (Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24), suggesting there was only one fundamental (Abrahamic) covenant, and that the Mosaic law was an aspect of but not the same as that fundamental covenant.

Scripture never puts the land on the same level as Mosaic law. If the latter was binding on Jews but not on Gentiles in the same way (as it only teaches spiritual principles of holiness to Gentiles), and if the church is overwhelmingly Gentile, in one sense Gentiles can say that it has become obsolete (but not irrelevant) for them. But they can never say that about the people of Israel or the land of Israel. The Gentiles of faith have been grafted into the olive tree of the people of Israel. And the land of Israel is God's 'holy abode' (Ex 15:13). Scholars as diverse as the Catholic Gary Anderson, Lutheran Robert Jenson, and Reformed Karl Barth have argued that the New Testament authors viewed

the land of Israel as continuing to be God's holy abode.

Scholars have long pointed out that Israel's *enjoyment* of the land was conditional: her people were exiled when they disobeyed the terms of the Mosaic covenant. But just as the original gift of the land was unconditional and permanent, so too the return to the land was an unconditional gift of grace. Repentance did not precede it. The Scriptures suggest instead that repentance and full spiritual renewal would take place *after* return and restoration.

In Ezekiel's vision of the resurrection of the dry bones, first God says he will take the people of Israel and 'bring them to their own land', and then later he 'will make them one nation in the land'. Then, even later, he 'will cleanse them' (Ezek 37:21, 22, 23). So the relationship between Israel and the land is governed by both conditional law and unconditioned promise, and fulfilment of the promise proceeds by stages.

## V. Contemporary Implications

Today's 'new' Christian Zionists do not believe that the state of Israel is a perfect country; that it should not be criticized for its failures; that it is necessarily the last Jewish state we will see before the end of days; or that we know the particular timetable or political schema that will come either before or in the final days.<sup>18</sup>

But they are convinced that the state of Israel, which currently has

<sup>18</sup> See Gerald R. McDermott, ed., *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

more than two million non-Jewish residents, is the institution that protects the people of Israel today, and that support for this state and its people is eroding all over the world. The modern nation of Israel lies in a region of movements and governments bent on its destruction. Main-line Protestants have withdrawn their support for it, and many evangelicals are now starting to follow their lead, using the same faulty arguments as the mainliners.

There are good prudential reasons for supporting Israel today. Israel is an island of democracy and freedom in a sea of authoritarian and despotic regimes. It needs friends as anti-Semitism rises precipitously around the world. But Christians should also recognize that there are strong *theological* reasons to believe that the people of Israel remain significant for the history of redemption, and that the land of Israel remains important to God's providential purposes.

## Call for Papers

*The Evangelical Review of Theology* (ERT) is the WEA Theological Commission's journal. Beginning in 2019, we are more fully synthesizing the content of ERT with the work of the Theological Commission by highlighting, in each issue, a theme related to topics that the Theological Commission is addressing.

We invite articles based on these themes, although submissions on any other topics are still welcome. Submit them to editor Bruce Barron at [bruce.barron0@gmail.com](mailto:bruce.barron0@gmail.com). Questions may be directed to Peirong Lin, research coordinator for the WEA's Department of Theological Concerns, at [peironglin@worldea.org](mailto:peironglin@worldea.org).

### **Engagement in the Public Space** (October 2019 issue)

At the WEA, we seek to work with other international institutions like the UN as well as in many different government contexts. One important global trend today is the rise in nationalism in politics. Our faith impacts how we interact with the broader public. What does this mean for our theology? What kind of theological reflection is required in pluralistic, postmodern societies? Does one's theology change in the face of a nationalistic or closed government context? How should Christians live out their theologies in the public space? *Due date July 2019.*

### **Theological Education** (January 2020 issue)

As evangelicals, we pride ourselves on taking the Bible seriously. At the same time, we live in a time that is different from biblical times. The world today is globalized and digitalized. How should these considerations influence our theological education? What is the role of higher criticism in theology? What is the place for contextual or systematic theology? *Due date 1 October 2019.*



# Frangelism: Evangelizing by Storytelling

Johannes Reimer

Beat Lehmann, a successful businessman in Paris, uses the word *frangelism* to describe his approach to personal evangelism. FRAN is an acronym for friends, relatives, associates and neighbours. Alistair Begg, widely known senior pastor at Parkside Church in Cleveland, USA and the Bible teacher on the 'Truth for Life' radio program, uses the same expression.<sup>1</sup> The term 'frangelism' seems to express in a nutshell what evangelism means. In this paper, I argue for a broader use of the term.

## I. Gospelling: Spelling God's Story

In my latest book on evangelism I have suggested that we rethink our classic approaches to evangelism by referring to the old Germanic term *God-spell*, the etymological source of the modern-day word *gospel*. 'God-spell' translates as telling God's story, which is exactly what the New Testament does in describing the good

news, or the *evangel*, about Jesus the Son of God himself.<sup>2</sup>

To evangelize means to share the story of Jesus—his life, teaching, death and resurrection. He was God's messenger, proclaiming God's grace and forgiveness of sin through his own work of reconciliation. In him God reconciled himself with the world of man (2 Cor 5:18). The message is good news because the messenger marked the way to life. He is the good news in person. In other words, the messenger is the message, as D. George Vanderlip rightly says.<sup>3</sup> The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, 'Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal' (2 Tim 2:8–9).

The gospel is a story, the Jesus story. It is not simply a set of truths, but rather the truth lived by a person. Jesus said, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Fa-

1 See Begg's 1994 audio message 'FRAngelism, Part One', available at <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/frangelism-1friends-relatives-assoc-/>.

2 See the discussion in Johannes Reimer, *Gooseling: Lernen über Jesus zu reden* (Munich: Francke Verlag, 2019), 12.19–30.

3 D. George Vanderlip: *Jesus Christ: The Message and the Messenger* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016).

ther except through me' (Jn 14:6). He is the bread of life (Jn 6:35), the light of the world (Jn 8:12), the good shepherd (Jn 10:10), the door to God's people (Jn 10:7), resurrection and life (Jn 11:25–26). In him is life (Jn 1:1–2), and salvation for the sinner is available in his name (Acts 4:12).

The most important question people on Earth can ask is who Jesus is (Mk 8:27–29). This question is the starting point of all discussion about God's way of life. This is, as the South African missiologist J. N. J. (Klippiess) Kritzinger puts it, 'a question of mission—a mission of questions.'<sup>4</sup>

The story of Jesus determines the content of what the good news is. And stories are narratives; they must be told as a story one knows, shared as a story one loves and lived as a life-changing story. Essentially, evangelism is storytelling. The New Testament powerfully marks the parameter of narrative evangelism. Frangelism is clearly biblically based. Let's examine the Scriptures.

## II. *Oikos*: The Context of Frangelism

Intensive evangelization through the apostolic church began soon after Pentecost with amazing effectiveness. In less than hundred years, a few relatively uneducated disciples of Jesus spawned a growing mighty stream of Jesus-followers in all major cities of the Roman Empire, reaching all strata of society and spreading the good news to the furthest corners of

the known world. All this happened in an age marked by primitive means of transportation and communication.

Unquestionably, this story is a miracle under the guidance of God himself, through the Holy Spirit, whom the believers confessed to be the Lord of mission (2 Cor 3:17). The apostolic church's method of evangelizing is quite interesting, however. Persecuted by the Roman state, the disciples were excluded from any means of mass evangelism. Their place of action was the private house.

Thomas Wolf is right when he claims that the norm of evangelism in the early church was *oikos* (household) evangelism. Michael Green, who studied intensively the practice of evangelism during the constitutive years of Christianity, sees in the private home the decisive factor for the fast spread of the gospel.<sup>5</sup>

The private house, characterized by intense relationships among family and friends, offered a platform for successful evangelization and allowed unprecedented growth of the church.<sup>6</sup> And the church consciously used family networks as a key for its missionary work.<sup>7</sup> Evangelism and consequently church development were centred on family and friends.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelisation zur Zeit der ersten Christen. Motivation, Methodik und Strategie* (Stuttgart-Neuenhausen, 1970), 240.

<sup>6</sup> Jörg Frey, 'Die Ausbreitung des frühen Christentums: Perspektive für die gegenwärtige Praxis der Kirche', in *Kirche zwischen Kultur und Evangelium*, ed. Martin Reppenhausen (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 2010), 109.

<sup>7</sup> Frey, 'Die Ausbreitung', 105.

<sup>8</sup> For more detailed information on the role of families in evangelization during the ap-

<sup>4</sup> J. N. J. Kritzinger, 'A Question of Mission—a Mission of Questions', *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies* 30, no. 1 (April 2002): 144–73.

Concentration on private households could encourage a renewal of evangelistic activity today. Swiss theologian Jörg Frey rightfully encourages today's church to learn from the praxis of the apostolic church.<sup>9</sup> The correlation between successful mission and family-centred evangelization is well documented throughout the New Testament.<sup>10</sup>

At least four crucial factors determine the prominent role of the *oikos* for evangelism. First, in a private house Christians lived side by side with their relatives and those who belonged to the household. People could hardly hide their convictions. Life took place in an open space. Any change in attitude and behaviour was immediately noticed. Christians committed to following Jesus and his ethical standards could not escape being noticed. Accordingly, witness grew into an automatic exercise. The apostle Paul refers to those Christians as an open letter read by everybody (2 Cor 3:3). Living an alternative life in an open environment forced conversations on what was triggering such a lifestyle.

Second, the family was the most secure place for sharing the gospel. Family members would first and foremost protect one another, even when some members changed their religious convictions. Christians could function for a longer period of time unnoticed by the greater society, protected by family ties. This gave them time to influence and convince other

members of the family. Soon whole households turned to Jesus.

Third, family in the ancient world was not just the nuclear family of our day, consisting of father, mother and children. A number of generations lived under the same roof, sharing a common profession and space. Family was more like a clan, a close and related neighbourhood. Christians could easily reach substantial numbers of people without leaving the protected borders of their clan.

Fourth, religious associations in ancient Greek and Roman times were typically formed around private households. Markus Öhler shows, in his article on the Pauline praxis, that Paul was not particularly original in founding his church plants in private households, but rather was completely consistent with the culture.<sup>11</sup>

It is easy to see how the evangelistic praxis of the apostolic church targeted family members, friends and neighbours. In other words, it was frangelistic in nature. The private household or *oikos* set the frame and context in which evangelism as storytelling became the most powerful tool to spread the good news through the Roman Empire.

ostolic times, see Johannes Reimer and Wilhelm Faix, *Familien—Zukunft der Kirche. Zur Korrelation von Familie und Mission* (Munich: Francke Verlag, 2017), 77–83.

<sup>9</sup> Frey, 'Die Ausbreitung', 105–9.

<sup>10</sup> See Reimer and Faix, *Familien*, 86–103.

<sup>11</sup> Markus Öhler, 'Gründer und ihre Gründung. Antike Vereinigungen und die paulinische Gemeinde in Philippi', in *Der Philipperbrief des Paulus in der hellenistisch-römischen Welt*, ed. Jörg Frey and Benjamin Schliesser (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2015), 121–51; Markus Öhler, 'Römisches Vereinsrecht und christliche Gemeinden', in *Zwischen den Reichen. Neues Testament und Römische Herrschaft*, ed. M. Labahn and J. Zangenber (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2002), 51–71.

### III. Frangelism: Applying the Apostolic Method Today

Stressing the role of house groups in Christian evangelism is nothing new. The literature written on this issue is filling libraries. Numerous evangelical authors have addressed the topic.<sup>12</sup> Around the world, home groups are considered a key building block for successful church growth.<sup>13</sup> The pastor of the largest church in the world, the Korean David Yonggi Cho, claims that house cells of the church he leads determine their 'keys to evangelism'.<sup>14</sup> He relates the phenomenal growth of his church to the many house cells located in the neighbourhoods where church members live. The cells connect the message of the gospel with the day-to-day life of church members in a way that appears convincing to most people.<sup>15</sup> His church counts thousands of small-group cells.

A house cell or small group is not equal to a house church. Some authors claim that the house churches in the New Testament were independent churches, as indicated by the expression 'the church in their house' (see for instance 1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3–5; Phlm 2; Col 4:15).<sup>16</sup> Others

rather see one local church meeting in multiple private houses, as seems to have been the case in Jerusalem or Rome.<sup>17</sup> In this case, each house gathering would not have represented an independent church.

In this article I will not discuss the differences between or the implications of the two views, but will rather concentrate on the frangelistic role of the house as such.

It is crucial to note the basic difference between both the small house cell or house church and the *oikos* fellowship in the New Testament. The latter involved people from the immediate household and neighbourhood.<sup>18</sup> The fellowship was highly familiar, as the people shared work and life and knew each other well. In contrast, typical modern house cells and churches, at least in the Western and urban world, recruit their members from across long distances. Members of such groups seldom see one another beyond the group meeting or share life and work together. Usually they reflect a sense of 'our kind of people' and may be viewed as homogeneous social units, as proposed by

12 Neal Cole, *Klein und stark—Minigruppen: ein Weg zur ganzheitlichen Nachfolge*, 3rd ed. (Glashütten: C&P Verlag, 2005); Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1994), 68ff.

13 Heino Masemann, *Hauskreise—Bausteine für Gemeindegarbeit* (Basel: Brunnen, 1992).

14 David Yonggi Cho, *Erfolgreiche Hauszellengruppen* (Cologne: Christliche Gemeinde Köln, 1987), 59.

15 Cho, *Erfolgreiche*, 60.

16 Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

1988); Keith Smith, *Hauskirchen—Manifest für Deutschland* (Xanten: GloryWorld-Medien, 2009).

17 See especially R. W. Gehring, *Hausgemeinde und Mission. Die Bedeutung antiker Häuser und Hausgemeinschaften—von Jesus bis Paulus* (Giessen and Basel: Brunnen, 2000); H.-J. Klauck, *Hausgemeinde und Hauskirche im frühen Christentum* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1981).

18 C. Claussen, 'Frühes Christentum zwischen Familie und Hausgemeinde', in *Haushalt, Hauskult, Hauskirche. Zur Arbeitsteilung der Geschlechter in Wirtschaft und Religion*, ed. E. Klinger, S. Böhm, and T. Franz (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2004), 61–77.

the American church growth movement, which has followed the ideas of Donald McGavran, founder of the School of Church Growth in Pasadena, California. McGavran suggested that an intentional concentration on such groups effectively promotes church growth.<sup>19</sup> His ideas have been widely disputed and even rejected as theologically unjustified.<sup>20</sup> Such specialized house cells or Bible studies, advocated by McGavran and many other writers on issues of evangelism and church growth, were completely unknown to the ancient apostolic church.

Surely, wider families living together under one roof, as was the case in ancient times, are a rare phenomenon in the Western world today. It thus seems rather difficult to copy the experience of the apostolic church. But neighbourhoods exist where people theoretically have access to each other's lives. In fact, communities worldwide exist in neighbourhoods. Outreach at the neighbourhood level is probably the closest thing to the New Testament *oikos* format, since the neighbourhood allows a high degree of sharing, helping, assisting one another in times of need, and so on.<sup>21</sup> And where church families involve their whole membership in witnessing holistically to neighbours, great things can happen.<sup>22</sup> Expanding one's

witness to social neighbours as well, such as co-workers, social contacts, and people with whom one shares hobbies or leisure activities, will obviously intensify the results.

Frangelism functions best in such a neighbourhood-based, friendly setting. No one proved the effectiveness of this system better than the ancient apostolic church.

#### IV. Frangelism: Steps Towards Effectiveness

Sharing the gospel frangelistically brings new evangelistic life into Western churches. What are the steps towards doing frangelism in the church?

First, concentrate your church life on equipping whole families for mission and evangelism. Witnessing must become the DNA of every church member, regardless of age or social status.

Second, help your families to start a meaningful social life in their neighbourhood. Teach them how to live without always talking about the gospel. Families who become centres of communal fellowship, neighbourhood assistance and help will soon attract those who feel left out, those in need of friends and love—the very things that Christians are called to give their fellow humans.

Third, teach your families to live and share the gospel at the right time, with the right words, and personally as much as possible. Things will change when more churches understand and follow this model. Frangelism is a way towards renewal and effectiveness for all churches.

<sup>19</sup> Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> Rene Padilla, *Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 168; Johannes Reimer, *Die Welt umarmen. Theologie des gesellschaftsrelevanten Gemeindebaus*. Transformationsstudien, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Marburg: Francke Verlag, 2013), 256–58.

<sup>21</sup> Reimer and Faix, *Familien*, 236–48.

<sup>22</sup> Alfred Yeo, 'The Local Church Reaches

Its Neighborhood', in Bruce J. Nicholls, *The Church: God's Agent for Change* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1986), 186ff.

# The Doxological Dimension of Ethics

Thomas Schirrmacher

*If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet 4:11)*

## I. Worship and Ethics

Christian ethics is so inseparably bound to the Christian faith that it cannot exist as a separate, free-floating entity. Dogmatics (Christian doctrine) and ethics (Christian praxis) are inextricably linked. Heiko Krimmer writes:

There is no such thing as Biblical, Christian ethics. That there is such a specialist field within the concept of theology at all is a consequence of the invasion of the Enlightenment into theology. What we nowadays describe and discuss under the umbrella term of 'Christian ethics', i.e., Christian praxis, was originally contained in all the individual areas of theology and did not claim to have its specific area. A biblical and, more specifically, Christian ethic was first declared to be its own domain when Kant, for example, presented his Enlightenment ethics with its own ethical edifice. And yet, it is not possible to speak about Christian praxis

which is removed from Christian faith. Ethics and dogmatics, life and doctrine, do not allow themselves under any circumstances to be separated from each other within the Bible's perimeter.<sup>1</sup>

When Georg Calixt put forth the first independent work on ethics in 1634, his intention was not to separate himself from dogmatics but 'rather to include philosophical ethics within dogmatics'.<sup>2</sup> However, in the long run that led to the same result, namely that ethics was uncoupled from dogmatics and from exegesis. In contrast, Emil Brunner wrote similarly to Krimmer, 'One can only correctly present all of ethics as a part of dogmatics because ethics is also a question of God's actions upon and through people.'<sup>3</sup>

Christian ethics is also not a continuation of and certainly not an appendage to Christian worship. Rather, it is a direct component and a direct consequence of worship. C. H. Dodd

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<sup>1</sup> Heiko Krimmer, 'Grundlagen christlicher Ethik', printed excerpt from *Das Fundament: Zeitschrift des DCTB* (Korntal, n.d.), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Honecker, *Einführung in die Theologische Ethik* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Emil Brunner, *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen* (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1939): 71-72.

wrote, "The Christian religion is, as is Judaism ... , an ethical religion in the special sense that it does not acknowledge a final separation between worship and social behavior."<sup>4</sup>

That worship and ethics in Christianity are so closely linked with each other has to do with the fact that God is a just God, and that all ethics is determined on the basis of the justness of his essence. Thus, Gottfried Quell writes the following about the Old Testament: "One could say that justice comprises the foundation of the vision of God in the Old Testament. ... That God sets what justice is and as a just God is bound to justice is an indispensable proposition for the Old Testament knowledge of God in all its variations."<sup>5</sup>

For that reason, there are also areas not normally addressed in drafts of Christian ethics, such as prayer,<sup>6</sup> worship and the Christian church, which in general belong among the innermost issues of Christian ethics.<sup>7</sup>

4 C. H. Dodd. *Das Gesetz der Freiheit: Glaube und Gehorsam nach dem Zeugnis des Neuen Testaments* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1960), 7.

5 Gottfried Quell. "Der Rechtsgedanke im AT", in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1990), 176–78. Quell certainly assumes that the legal thinking of Israel was so strong that it shaped the thinking about God. According to the New Testament understanding, this was, however, just the opposite. Cf. what is said about the image of God in Lesson 54.2., also comp. chapters 44.10. and 33.A.2.

6 See for example Werner Elert, *Das christliche Ethos: Grundlinien der lutherischen Ethik* (Hamburg: Furche-Verlag, 1961), 397–408, and note Calvin's long discussion of prayer in his *Institutes*.

7 See the introduction and arrangement of

The expression used for true, pure teaching, orthodoxy (Greek *orthos* = correct, straight; *doxein* = to praise, to extol), on the basis of the meaning of the word, means neither true teaching nor true praxis. Rather, it brings both of these together to express true veneration of God.

Whereas Paul speaks in Romans 1:18–32 of irrational worship that refuses to give God thanks, the first thing he mentions in the practical portion of Romans is that we are exhorted in view of God's mercy to place our life at God's disposal, for "this is your spiritual act of worship" (Rom 12:1). A form of worship that does not have practical consequences in all areas of life is an irrational form of worship. Even if all confessions surely share this thought, it has historically been emphasized primarily by Orthodox and Reformed believers, and at the present time above all by the Orthodox and Evangelicals (who have a Reformed or Baptist heritage). Of course, the degree to which that ethic has actually been put into practice is another story and is a topic for sociological and historical analysis.

In "Singing the Ethos of God", Brian R. Brock<sup>8</sup> considers the Psalms to be a pattern for Christian ethics, because they do not only speak about and of God. Rather, they are conversations with God that receive and express ethical instruction, ask for strength to achieve fulfillment of God's direction, and thank God for his ordinances, directions and aid.

my *Ethik*. 8 vols. (Nuremberg: VTR, 2009).

8 Brian R. Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

## II. Reformed Theology

In the Protestant realm, doxology, as the origin and aim of ethics, became a trademark of the Reformed movement. It is not coincidental that the World Alliance of Reformed Churches named its 1977 centennial celebration 'The Glory of God and the Future of Man'.

For John Calvin,<sup>9</sup> the glory of God was the individual's goal in life, as well as the goal of the entire history of salvation:

The regiment belongs to the Lord, and for people just as for the entire world there is, outside of his glory, nothing worth striving for. What can diminish God's glory is foolish, irrational, and malicious.<sup>10</sup>

It is not very sound theology to confine a man's thoughts so much to himself, and not to set before him, as the prime motive of his existence, zeal to illustrate the glory of God. For we are born first of all for God, and not for ourselves. As all things flowed from him, and subsist in him, so, says Paul (Rom

11:36), they ought to be referred to him. I acknowledge, indeed, that the Lord, the better to recommend the glory of his name to men, has tempered zeal for the promotion and extension of it, by uniting it indissolubly with our salvation. But since he has taught that this zeal ought to exceed all thought and care for our own good and advantage, and since natural equity also teaches that God does not receive what is his own, unless he is preferred to all things, it certainly is the part of a Christian man to ascend higher than merely to seek and secure the salvation of his own soul.<sup>11</sup>

For Calvin, the glory of God is primarily found in creation, in Christ and in the goal of salvation history.

It was typical for Calvin to place a comprehensive and personal appeal for prayer, for the church as well as with particular regard for the private realm, before the exegesis of the Lord's Prayer. At the same time, the experience of answered prayer plays a significant role for him,<sup>12</sup> as Calvin is overall marked by a deep, practical piety. In spite of his deep exegetical and systematic digging, he allows the experience of Christian life to flow into his work.<sup>13</sup> 'According to the

<sup>9</sup> On Calvin's teaching about praise and worship, see Pamela Ann Moeller, *Calvin's Doxology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997). On Calvin's view of the glory of God, see Wilhelm Niesel, *Lobt Gott, den Herrn der Herrlichkeit: Theologie um Gottes Ehre* (Konstanz: Christliche Verlagsanstalt, 1983), 13–16; Eberhard Busch, 'Calvins Verkündigung der Herrlichkeit Gottes', [www.reformiert-info.de/288-0-105-16.html](http://www.reformiert-info.de/288-0-105-16.html); James J. Tyne, 'Putting Contexts in Their Place: God's Transcendence in Calvin's Institutes', in *The Standard Bearer*, ed. Steven M. Schlissel (Nacogdoches, TX: CMP, 2002), 369–95.

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift: Römerbrief und Korintherbriefe* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1960), 240.

<sup>11</sup> Translation from [www.glaubensstimme.de/doku.php?id=autoren:calvin:calvin-antwort\\_an\\_kardinal\\_sadolet](http://www.glaubensstimme.de/doku.php?id=autoren:calvin:calvin-antwort_an_kardinal_sadolet).

<sup>12</sup> Hans Scholl, *Der Dienst des Gebetes nach Johannes Calvin* (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1968); Paul C. Böttger, *Calvins Institutio als Erbauungsbuch* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990), 71–74; Eva Harasta, *Lob und Bitte: Eine systematisch-theologische Untersuchung über das Gebet* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005), 112–42.

<sup>13</sup> Harmannus Obendiek, 'Die Erfahrung



line we have noted up to this point, everything is—and it should not be a surprise—geared towards instruction for prayer. This is demonstrated in the disposition.<sup>14</sup> The true mark of the church is, according to Calvin, not preaching the Word of God but rather its being followed,<sup>15</sup> and that is especially expressed in personal prayer.

The Reformed view has found its classical expression in the famous first two questions of the 1647 Westminster Shorter Catechism:

1. What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever.
2. What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him? The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him.<sup>16</sup>

The Heidelberg Catechism expresses it somewhat differently but likewise powerfully, in that the chapter on ethics, built upon the Ten Commandments, goes by the title 'Of Thankfulness'.<sup>17</sup> However, as is gener-

ally known, this all goes back to Martin Luther's similar approach of introducing the explanation of each of the Ten Commandments with the words: 'We should fear and love God, so that we ...'

The glory of God as the goal of 'Calvinists' also flowed into Max Weber's famous thesis that Calvinists had brought about capitalism. A classical description of Calvinists from this discussion should suffice as a representative indication:

Everything comes down to the moment when God is honoured: the entire world is appointed for his glory; the same thing is the task of the Christian. God seeks activity on the part of Christians in the world and society; for these should be so established that they serve the glory of God; social work, i.e., work in the world and society, in which Calvinism is enjoined as a duty *in majorem gloriam Dei*, and it is precisely this character which is also found in vocational work.<sup>18</sup>

In a monumental section of his *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth, as is generally known, discarded the differentiation between dogmatics and ethics and in good Reformed fashion set the glory of God in the centre of the 'perfections of God' (as he ingen-

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in ihrem Verhältnis zum Worte Gottes bei Calvin', in *Aus Theologie und Geschichte der reformierten Kirche. Festgabe für E. F. Karl Müller* (Neukirchen: Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1933), 180–214.

14 Böttger, *Calvins Institutio*, 71.

15 See Benjamin B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956), 16.

16 *Der kürzere Westminster Katechismus von 1647*, trans. Kurt Vetterli (Bonn: Martin Bucer Seminar, 2006). [www.bucer.eu](http://www.bucer.eu).

17 *The Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. Thomas Schirrmacher (Bonn: Martin Bucer Seminar, 2005); see also, for commentary on these two questions, Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter*

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*Catechism of the Westminster Assembly Explained from Scripture* (1674; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), 1–24; Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity: Contained in Sermons upon the Westminster Assembly's Catechism* (1692; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 6–38.

18 Felix Rachfahl, 'Kalvinismus und Kapitalismus', in *Max Weber, Die protestantische Ethik II: Kritiken und Antikritiken*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1978), 65–66.

iously called the attributes of God) as a landmark.<sup>19</sup> Glory, Barth stated,

is the appearing paragon of all divine perfections. It is the fullness of the divinity of God, it is the eruptive, expressive, manifesting reality of all that which God is. It is the essence of God inasmuch as God is a self-revealing being.<sup>20</sup>

### III. Orthodox Theology

Outside the Protestant realm, doxology has always been emphasized as the origin and aim of Christian ethics, above all in Orthodox theology. A few examples should suffice.

Geoffrey Wainwright calls his combined dogmatics and ethics *Doxology*, and he states in his preface that every systematic theology is a 'theology of worship'.<sup>21</sup> Vigen Guroian champions the same view in his ethics, in particular in his chapter 'Seeing Worship as Ethics'.<sup>22</sup> He emphasizes that ethics and doctrine are not to be separated from religious practice, at the apex of which worship stands.<sup>23</sup>

Stanley Samuel Harakas likewise emphasizes the character of ethics as worship in his two-volume work

on ethics, indicating that 'Theoria and Praxis' are not to be separated.<sup>24</sup> The expression of the viewpoint that worship and ethics have to be lived out sounds very similar to evangelical and pietistic formulations. In the USA, where Orthodox and Evangelicals most frequently deal with each at eye level, an unusual show of unity is demonstrated by repeatedly speaking about this openly.

Interestingly, Wainwright, an Orthodox systematic theologian, expressly and approvingly quotes the first article of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, a Reformed document!<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Wilhelm Niesel calls 'To God alone be the glory' the 'slogan of Reformed believers throughout time'. At the same time, he suggests that this truth must be witnessed to by all churches, and he refers to Easter Jubilation in the Greek Orthodox Church as an example.<sup>26</sup>

### IV. Other Denominations

All denominations, not just the Reformed and Orthodox, confess in principle that doxology is the justification and goal of ethics. In each case it is only a question of how prominently this actually works itself out in the dogmatic and ethical system—and, of course, how it looks in practice.

Thus, 'all for the greater glory of God' (*omnia ad maiorem Dei gloriam*) was Ignatius of Loyola's (1491–1556) motto. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuit

**19** Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1987), vol. 7, 722–64; see also vol. 8, 362–65, and vol. 31, 246 (keyword 'Herrlichkeit' [glory]), as well as John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), 592–95.

**20** Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, 7:725.

**21** Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: A Systematic Theology* (London: Epworth Press, 1980), preface.

**22** Vigen Guroian, *Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 51–78.

**23** Guroian, *Incarnate Love*, 51.

**24** Stanley Samuel Harakas, *Toward Transfigured Life: The 'Theoria' of Eastern Orthodox Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing, 1984), 3–5, 188–96.

**25** Wainwright, *Doxology*, 17.

**26** Niesel, *Lobt Gott*, 11.

order, wrote the following in his *Spiritual Exercises*: 'Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord.'<sup>27</sup>

In the confession of faith of the decrees of the First Vatican Council (1870–1871), one reads in point 5 of the Canons the following: 'If anyone ... denies that the world was created for the glory of God: let him be anathema.'<sup>28</sup>

From a Lutheran point of view, Amy C. Schiffrin laments that the basic problem in modern Christian social ethics is 'the cosmetic separation of ethics from doxology', and she calls for 'doxological ethics'.<sup>29</sup> Similar examples can be cited from all Christian denominations and orientations.

## V. Liturgy and Ethics

'Honour be unto the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever will be and from eternity to eternity. Amen.' Since the fourth century, this liturgical refrain has accentuated Christian worship services and has summarized its elementary theological structure.<sup>30</sup>

Much discussion has been given to the relationship between liturgy and ethics. Liturgy is only a part of the entire spectrum of worship. However, it is the most visible and most significant expression of worship. God seeks public and collective reverence and pronouncement of his glory, and the body of Christ, the church, is most visible when more than anything else it corporately celebrates the Lord's supper and, in so doing, sacramentally places thanks to God and Christ at the centre of the faith.

The ancient maxim *lex orandi, lex credendi*, which means that whatever one prays and confesses in worship determines faith and action, is affirmed by Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran and Reformed churches<sup>31</sup> but admittedly has fallen into oblivion in a number of wings of the evangelical spectrum. Calvin, for instance, assumed that the church had to work intensively on what occurs in

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theologische Grundlegung', in *Handbuch der Liturgik*, ed. Hans-Christoph Schmidt-Lauber and Karl-Heinrich Bieritz (Leipzig: Ev. Verlagsanstalt, 1995), 72.

31 Martin Sturflesser and Stefan Winter (eds.), *Ahne nach, was du vollziehst: Positionsbestimmungen zum Verhältnis von Liturgie und Ethik* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2009); Wainwright, *Doxology*, 218–86 on the Orthodox and Catholics; Gerhard Sauter, *Zugänge zur Dogmatik: Elemente theologischer Urteilsbildung* (Göttingen: V&R, 1998), 22 on Lutherans and Anglicans; Dennis Ngien, *Gifted Response: The Triune God as the Causative Agency of Our Responsive Worship* (Milton Kenyes, UK: Paternoster, 2008), 1–2 (Basil of Caesarea), 56–58 (Anselm), 75–76 (Augustine), 159 (Calvin). An evangelical justification is found in Paul F. M. Zahl, 'Formal-Liturgical Worship', in Zahl et al., *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: 6 Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 25–27.

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27 Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, chapter 23, quoted in [www.jesuiten.org/geschichte/index.htm](http://www.jesuiten.org/geschichte/index.htm) vom 24.2.2009. As a more recent Catholic example, see Karl Hörmann, *Lexikon der christlichen Moral* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1976), columns 109–39 (chapter title 'Bestimmung des Menschen' or Man's Calling).

28 DS 3025 (1976 edition).

29 Amy C. Schiffrin, 'Delight, Design and Destiny: Toward a Doxological Ethics of Sexuality', 28 April 2009, [www.lutheranforum.org/sexuality/delight-design-and-destiny-toward-a-doxological-ethics-of-sexuality/](http://www.lutheranforum.org/sexuality/delight-design-and-destiny-toward-a-doxological-ethics-of-sexuality/).

30 Geoffrey Wainwright. 'Systematisch-

worship services, for it is through the word, song and sacrament that the everyday life of believers is shaped. As a matter of fact, the consequences of the absence of certain elements from modern worship—for example, the lack of preaching from the Old Testament or the lack of intercessory prayer for the persecuted church—is often underestimated. Evangelicals frequently fail to recognize how deeply the elements of worship other than the sermon can shape belief through their continual presence or repetition; for instance, the collective prayer for forgiveness fosters humility, and its omission can reflect a certain feeling that Christians are generally better people than others, contrary to Luke 18:11–14.

The thought of the common bond of glorification in worship services and of dogmatics and ethics is arguably most pronounced in Orthodox theology. The classic statement on this point may be the following: 'The lack of agreement between liturgy and ethics leads to an undesired separation between that which is worldly and that which is holy.'<sup>32</sup>

## VI. The Glory of God

When the glory of God is commended to people in Scripture, this message has two components. On one hand, the Bible emphasizes that God already possesses glory eternally, regardless of what we think of him. He is the God of glory (Acts 7:2), 'the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious

Father' (Eph 1:17). Just as on Mount Sinai, God's glory comes from above and becomes visible for people to see (Ex 24:16–17).

Created things can be called glorious only insofar as their glory is derived from God's glory, with humankind leading the way as the image of God (see especially Psalm 8:6: 'You ... crowned him with glory and honour').<sup>33</sup> However, this also includes celestial bodies (1 Cor 15:40–41) or the splendored lilies of the field (Mt 6:28), even if since the fall all this 'glory' is ephemeral just as the grass is. This means that in the end every form of glory only reflects the glory of God.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, there is also the glory that we ascribe to God, or the glorification of God, which in the end only acknowledges his existing glory, as Psalm 150:2 makes clear: 'Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness.'

The Church Father and martyr Irenaeus of Lyons formulated it briefly and concisely: 'For the glory of God is a living man (*gloria Dei vivens homo*); and the life of man consists in beholding God' (*Against Heresies* IV 20:7).

Scholastic theology differentiated between the inner honour of God, which is in essence inherent to his nature, and the external honour of God, which he assigns to humankind and which is expressed in reverence shown by individuals. People see the glory of God (Num 14:22) and are responsible to see to it that 'the glory of

32 Guroian, *Incarnate Love*, 399. The liturgy of Orthodox worship is best described in German by Nikolaj V. Gogol, *Betrachtungen über die Göttliche Liturgie* (Würzburg: Der Christliche Osten, 1989).

33 On Psalm 8, see Esther Brünenberg, *Der Mensch in Gottes Herrlichkeit: Psalm 8 und seine Rezeption im Neuen Testament* (Würzburg: Echter, 2009), 135–239.

34 Especially according to Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, 8:364.

the Lord fills the whole earth' (14:21). We render God honour which is due him anyway and which he has anyway, as stated in 1 Chronicles 16:28–29: 'Ascribe to the Lord, O families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength; ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name. Bring an offering and come before him; worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness.'

Another important aspect of the glory of God is the fact that he shares his honour with no one (Is 48:11; Ex 20:1), which means for us that no one else is to be given honour—no other gods and powers and also no other people, be it the state, the church or an individual.

Although God's glory is permanent, the failure of believers to glorify him, especially if we live unholy lives, brings disgrace to God, at least in the eyes of non-believers: 'You who brag about the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you"' (Rom 2:23–24).

God inexplicably ties his honour to his people. Thus, in Isaiah 48:10–13, he calls, tests and refines 'Israel' because he is the almighty Creator (verse 13) and states that 'for my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another' (v. 11). Correspondingly, Ephesians 1:9–2:22 explains that God saves the church by grace and has it mature in good works so that all powers will recognize his greatness and 'in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory' (Eph 1:12). Ultimately, the following applies to believers: 'When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory' (Col 3:3–4;

see also 2 Thess 1:10).

## **VII. Goodness to the Honour of God: Gratitude as the Highest Commandment**

Conversely, it is repeatedly emphasized that everything good we do should accrue to the honour of God. Thus, the following is said of the gifts of grace: 'If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen' (1 Pet 4:11). According to 1 Corinthians 6:20, we are 'bought with a price. Therefore honour God with your body.' Thus, what we do physically is included here, as 1 Corinthians 10:31 demonstrates with respect to eating: 'So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.'

The highest commandment within Christian ethics is to thank God, honour him and love him with all of one's heart. In Romans 1:16–32, Paul proceeds on the assumption that humankind's original sin is not a certain concrete act. Rather, it lies in man's failure to thank and revere his Creator and his tendency instead to worship other things and other people. The concrete sins, such as slander or sexual aberrations, are first of all the consequence of God giving humankind over to their desires of their hearts (Rom 1:26, 28). It is also typical of Paul that in the midst of his dogmatic-ethical remarks he erupts into spontaneous praise: 'the creator ... who is forever praised. Amen' (v. 25).

The fall of man in Genesis 3 is im-

mediately followed, as a consequence of this tragic event, by the first fratricide in Genesis 4. One might tend to think of the horrible guilt of fratricide as leading to a broken relationship with God. But the Bible stresses the reverse: destroyed relationships among people are a consequence of the destroyed relationship between people and God.

### VIII. Awe before God and His Being as the Point of Departure for Christian Ethics

The biblical term 'fear of God' (better expressed as 'awe') very clearly illustrates the basic normative principle of Christian ethics, which sees everything that happens as intended for the glory of God. Ernst Luthardt has written that 'as early as the Old Testament, the fear of God, trust in God, and the love of God are the roots of moral behaviour.'<sup>35</sup>

The essence of Old Testament wisdom literature is the statement,<sup>36</sup> 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Prov 9:10; similarly Prov 1:7), or with even greater brevity: 'The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom' (Job 28:28). Here, 'wisdom' refers to practical life wisdom and not a purely intellectual item, as other texts demonstrate: 'The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honour' (Proverbs 15:33); 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his

precepts'<sup>37</sup> have good understanding' (Psalm 111:10). Ethical wisdom without the fear of God is thus unthinkable. For that reason, the Bible says, 'To fear the Lord is to hate evil' (Prov 8:13).

In both the Old and the New Testaments, God is by far the person mentioned most frequently. At the same time, the Scriptures are fully oriented towards communicating to people in their practical lives. This practical orientation, however, does not come at the expense of occupation with God. Rather, it arises from the fact that the essence of God, whom the Bible reveals, is repeatedly the reason for ethical instructions and decisions. David correctly sings, 'You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing' (Ps 16:2). W. S. Bruce has written the following about the Old Testament:

In Israel it is God himself who is the all wise one, the holy one, and the good one, the prototype of all moral life and action. ... Religious faith and ethical life are so intimately bound together through this foundational conception of the character of God that they cannot be separated from each other. 'At this point, Jewish ethics hooks into theology, but theology is itself essentially of an ethical nature.'<sup>38</sup>

Emil Brunner coined a similar formula: 'There is no 'goodness in

<sup>35</sup> Christoph Ernst Luthardt, *Kompendium der theologischen Ethik* (Leipzig: Dörffling & Franke, 1921), 9.

<sup>36</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985), 90–94.

<sup>37</sup> In Hebrew grammar, the word *his* refers to the 'precepts' in Psalm 111:7, but in older translations it referred to the 'fear of the Lord'. However, no true contradiction lies therein.

<sup>38</sup> W. S. Bruce, *The Ethics of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895), 38–39, including a quotation from W. L. Davidson.

itself',<sup>39</sup> since there is no goodness without one who is good and who creates, mandates and enables good.

What is good is what God does and wishes; what is evil is what occurs against the will of God. Goodness has its foundation and existence solely in God's will. An idea such as Zarathustra's religion, that God is the Lord because he chose the good, the idea of a law which stands above God, is unthinkable in the Old Testament. God is not merely a guardian of the moral law and of moral rules. Rather, he is their Creator.<sup>40</sup>

## IX. The Will of God

The will of God 'is the sole valid norm. For that reason, what is "religious" is at the same time that which is "moral", and the moral is religious. The relation to God is grounded in God's covenant with humankind; for that reason, it is a relationship of trust. It is nothing like a blind force of nature which asserts claim to God's rights of Lordship.'<sup>41</sup>

Since God himself is justice and he himself institutes just order, he cannot be unjust: 'Far be it from God to do evil, from the Almighty to do

wrong' (Job 34:10; see also Job 8:3; Deut 32:4; 2 Chron 19:7).

God is the point of departure and the authority of Christian ethics. Wherever another set of ethics applies, there is also another authority besides the authority of God, for 'the [final] authority of a system is the God of that system.'<sup>42</sup>

This applies not only to foundational statements, such as 'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy' (Lev 19:2; similarly 11:44). It also applies to individual questions. This is how Paul justifies his very specific directions as to how many prophets are allowed to speak in succession in a worship service (1 Cor 14:26–32). Paul concludes, 'For God is not a God of disorder but of peace' (1 Cor 14:33). To mention an additional case of God setting forth ethics by example, in the Ten Commandments the seventh day of the week is a day of rest because God himself rested in the creation of the world on the seventh day and blessed that day (Ex 20:11).

There are additional examples of substantiating commandments based on the essence of God. The prohibition against revering other gods is grounded in God's jealousy (Ex 20:5). The prohibition against the misuse of God's name refers to God as an afflicting God (Ex 20:7), and the overall rationale behind the Ten Commandments is the goodness of God: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out ... of the land of slavery' (Ex 20:2).

39 Emil Brunner, *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen* (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1939), 99.

40 Brunner, *Das Gebot*, 39. Brunner points out on pages 83 and 578–79 that the Aristotelian-Thomistic ethics of the Christian Middle Ages contradicted this principle and posited a principle of the good as an objective entity in place of the will of God. It also posited action appropriate to human nature ('natural law') as a subjective reaction in place of obedience.

41 Brunner, *Das Gebot*, 40.

42 Gary DeMar, *God and Government*, vol. 1 (Atlanta, GA: American Vision, 1982), 58.

## X. The Twofold Commandment: Love and Honour God and Love Others

The combination of honouring God and keeping his commandments, or loving God and, for that reason, loving his commands and living them out, pervades the entirety of the Scriptures. It is the foundational structure of the Ten Commandments. The book of Ecclesiastes ends with 'the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man' (Eccl 12:13). In Micah 6:8 one reads: 'He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.' Similarly, Deuteronomy 13:4 states, 'It is the Lord your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him.'

In the middle of the praise in Psalm 86:8–13 regarding the hope that all people will worship God and acknowledge his goodness because he rescues people from death, one reads in verse 11, 'Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name.'

The great commandments of the Old Testaments are well-known: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength' (Deut 6:4–5), and 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev 19:18; Mk 12:19–31). At this point, worship and ethics are placed on the same level.

The inalienability of the teaching of the Trinity and of the reverence given to the triune God lies, in my

opinion, in the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit. He did not first have to create a counterpart in order to be able to actually love. Rather, love is the agenda of creation, and it is founded on the fact that the world was created by a God who is love eternally in a very practical way, not only theoretically.

## XI. Shame and Guilt

At this point, we must go into detail regarding a question that has been carried into systematic theology from missiology, namely how the difference between guilt-oriented and shame-oriented cultures influences our question and whether biblical revelation is closer to the one or the other culture. Since issues in shame-oriented cultures are primarily addressed as matters of honour, Christians who live in these cultures particularly emphasize God's honour. Since on a global basis, evangelicals have functioned predominantly in shame-oriented cultures, evangelical missionaries, missiologists, and anthropologists have submitted related ground-breaking studies.<sup>43</sup>

In my book *Culture of Shame/Culture of Guilt* (German *Scham- oder Schuldgefühl?*), I have spoken out at length in favour of the complemen-

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<sup>43</sup> For example, Hannes Wiher, *Shame and Guilt: A Key to Cross-Cultural Ministry* (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2003); Martin Lomen, *Sünde und Scham im biblischen und islamischen Kontext* (Nuremberg: VTR, 2003); Thomas Schirrmacher and Klaus W. Müller (eds.), *Scham- und Schuldorientierung in der Diskussion: Kulturanthropologische, missiologische und theologische Einsichten* (Bonn: VKW; Nuremberg: VTR, 2006).



tarity of the biblical message with respect to this question. It is for this reason that shame-oriented cultures have accumulated needs in the area of biblical understanding of law and guilt—extending all the way to political applications. Conversely, guilt-oriented cultures, such as my German culture, have accumulated needs in how the Bible sees the loss of one's own honour and the disavowal of God's glory as consequences of the Fall. They need a deeper understanding of how the cross of Jesus restores God's honour and, with that, has restored and will restore our honour.

As a violation of the law of God, sin against God leads to guilt before God. And as an encroachment on the honour or glory of God, sin leads to shame before God. Only through God's righteousness and God's honour or glory is it possible for man's righteousness to be restored.<sup>44</sup>

This ultimate position of the honour of God makes it impossible to exclude aspects of an orientation towards honour and dishonour from Christian dogmatics and ethics!

The Bible is full of commands to give God the honour due him (1 Chron 16:28; Ps 3:4; 19:2; Lk 12:14). In the process, to give honour is in the final sense adoration, i.e. worship, and in the final analysis that is something to which only God is entitled: 'Oh, praise the greatness of our God!' (Deut 32:3).

For the Bible, the key question is not whether we are shame- or guilt-

oriented. Rather, the Bible orients itself towards our honour and justness. Whoever orients his or her sense of honour towards people as the final norm errs just as much as those who orient their sense of justness towards people as the final norm.

To some extent, one can find complementarity between shame and guilt orientations in the main confessions of the Reformation. Whereas the great Lutheran discovery was above all that justification cannot be oriented towards people and cannot in the final event be produced by people, but is rather a gift of God, the Reformed called for everything to be oriented towards the glory and honour of God and for making this the highest goal of life (without giving up the Lutheran discovery). An individual can as little produce this honour out of himself as he can do so with justness. Through God's justness, an individual can become just and come to God, and through God's honour and glory, an individual can gain the derived glory of the children of God. Together, both lead to a situation where we can have fellowship and peace with God (Rom 5:1).

God's honour means, on one hand, being oriented towards giving up one's own honour and not orienting oneself towards obtaining honour from people. One should primarily have shame before God and not before people. For that reason, people are criticized who do wrong things out of fear of other people. A Christian should orient himself towards God and not towards shame before other people: 'However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name' (1 Peter 4:16). 'What will others think of me?' is not a proper life principle.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Schirrmacher, *Scham- oder Schuldgefühl? Die christliche Botschaft angesichts von schuld- und schamorientierten Gewissen und Kulturen* (Bonn: VKW, 2005), 39.

The absence of the possibility of self-redemption means that we cannot produce justness or honour on our own. The idea of self-redemption can come to express the idea that humans can work up the necessary justification before God on their own, or that they can work up honour and glory before God on their own.

God has created us to be imbued with honour and justification and has also given us individually a conscience with a shame and guilt orientation. Both orientations contribute significantly to our success in life as

well-adjusted individuals and as community members.

Sin against God, as a violation of the law of God, leads to guilt before God. And as an encroachment on the honour and glory of God, sin leads to shame before God. For that reason, according to Genesis 3, Adam and Eve considered themselves guilty before God as well as being ashamed (Gen 3:9–12). Only through God's righteousness, glory and honour is it possible for man's righteousness to be restored.

## Books Reviewed

Donald Sinnema, Christian Moser  
and Herman J. Selderhuis, eds.  
*Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis  
Dordrechtanae 1618–1619, vol. 1*  
Reviewed by Thomas Schirrmacher

Kenneth R. Ross, J. Kwabena Asamo-  
ah-Gyadu and Todd M. Johnson, eds.  
*Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*  
Reviewed by Klaus Fiedler

Nancy R. Pearcey  
*Love Thy Body: Answering Hard  
Questions about Life and Sexuality*  
Reviewed by Peirong Lin

## Book Reviews

ERT (2019) 43:3, 281-285

***Acta et Documenta Synodi  
Nationalis Dordrechtanae 1618–  
1619, vol. 1 [The Acts of the Synod  
of Dordt, 1618–1619, vol. 1]***

**Donald Sinnema, Christian Moser  
and Herman J. Selderhuis, eds.  
Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht,  
2014  
cvii + 539 pp.**

***Reviewed by Thomas Schirrmacher,  
WEA Associate Secretary General for  
Theological Concerns***

The lack of a critical publication of the final documents regarding one of the most important historical events concerning Reformed churches, namely the Synod of Dordt, has been one of the puzzles of church history research. The sources found in numerous European archives have never been used, nor have they been made accessible to the general public.

On behalf of the Johannes a Lasco Library in Emden, the first volume of the *Acta et Documenta Synodi Nationalis Dordrechtanae 1618-1619* (ADSND) was published at the end of 2014. This volume is to be the least extensive, with just under 600 pages. The eight subse-

quent volumes are expected to have an average of 900 pages. The first volume covers only the various versions of the final reports produced at the time. However, these reports reveal a lot about the course of the Synod.

The other volumes will contain preparatory documents, minutes, positions taken by the nineteen delegations, reports of the condemned Remonstrants, and finally the reports and diary entries of the foreign and Dutch delegates. They will present almost exclusively unpublished and predominantly Latin texts (in addition to individual texts in Dutch, English, German and French) compiled from archives in the Netherlands, Switzerland, England and Germany.

The entire effort is an international undertaking. Selderhuis is a professor in the Netherlands, Moser in Zurich, and Sinnema in the USA. Germany is involved through the Johannes a Lasco Library, which is in charge of the project and which, in an exemplary manner, is also involved in researching and presenting the history of the Reformed churches. It will be interesting to see if this ambitious work will truly be completed in time for the 400th anniversary of the Synod.

The critical edition of the various final

reports of the Synod has been a great success. In a clear manner, the detailed introductory texts in English summarize what has been known so far. However, this information is supplemented with extensive information that became accessible during the process of editing. The name index briefly explains the functions of the individuals who are mentioned, but also, the front matter contains short biographies of all delegates. In addition, there is a very short register of biblical passages as well as a topical index. The texts themselves are lucidly edited. However, the texts of the final reports can be compared only via the topical index; they vary too much to be printed in parallel.

There is, first of all, the official final report of the minutes of the Synod ('Acta Authentica'), which was not published in the seventeenth century. Second comes a printed, largely abridged version of the final report that was published directly after the Synod ('Acta Contracta'). Third is an official version produced in the year following the Synod and intended for international distribution. This third item constitutes a strongly revised and slightly shortened version of the Acta Authentica, with linguistic changes made to almost every sentence. This version has long determined the historical image of Dordt. Only with the new edition does the extent of the editing become clear. Even though most of the editing was stylistic in nature, some rather subjectively formulated opinions turned into objective statements; conversely, many very sharp statements in Latin were softened.

The Dordrecht Synod (13 November 1618 to 9 May 1619) was the first and only general synod of the Reformed churches in Europe. All other Reformed synods in history were national synods. (The last two weeks of the Synod, on 13–29 May 1619 after the departure of

the international representatives, in fact constituted a Dutch national synod.)

Over the course of 154 sessions, the Synod of Dordt shaped the future of Calvinism. Because of the importance of the Dordt resolutions on the doctrine of salvation, it is often overlooked that the Synod passed essential resolutions before the arrival of the Arminians and then again after the main Synod. There was the preparation of a new Bible translation from the original text by a large expert committee, which appeared in 1637 as the 'Statenvertaling' (the states' translation); a text on church order for the Dutch church, which endured for a long time and exerted an influence on many Reformed texts of church order around the world; and the establishment of the Sunday catechism sermon on the Heidelberg Catechism, which became customary far beyond the Netherlands. The synod also covered the order of church instruction by the family all the way up to the study of theology, an area where foreign participants left deep tracks. The distribution of the Lord's Supper to children of slaves and other matters were addressed as well.

In my opinion (and Selderhuis agrees), the Synod's significance is roughly comparable with that of the Book of Concord of the Lutheran Church, as Christians following the first-generation Reformers resolved disputes and achieved a 'formulation of *eenigheid*', or 'three forms of unity'.

The eighteen representatives of the eight Dutch States General consisted of nine high-ranking members of the highest governing bodies of the states (six of whom had received doctorates in law), along with five mayors of large cities plus a sheriff, and also four noblemen. These 18 state representatives always had the last word, and they had received secret instructions. Meanwhile, almost

sixty pastors and theologians, selected by the provincial synods, formed the majority of the Synod.

The foreign representatives came primarily from the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, namely the Palatinate, Hesse, Nassau-Wetterau, Bremen, Emden, the Swiss cantons of Zurich, Basel, Bern and Schaffhausen, and independent Geneva. The Electoral Prince of Brandenburg did not let the delegates of Brandenburg participate because of concern about tensions with the Lutherans in the country. The French delegates could not come because of a travel ban issued by King Louis XIII, which is why four chairs documenting their membership were empty during the entire period of the Synod. However, the synod of the French Reformed Church adopted the results of Dordt in 1620.

Additional foreign representatives came from England. The head of the delegation of the Anglican Church, George Carleton, was addressed throughout the Synod using his title of Bishop, and he occupied a chair with an episcopal covering. Walter Balcanqual was an Anglican priest but officially represented the reformed Church of Scotland. These unusual relations have been little researched.

Experts have discussed whether there was already an intention at the Synod to establish a new teaching standard in a confessional document, or whether the results only later gradually developed into a confessional standard. The editors tend to take the former view, and I agree with them. In my opinion, the volume does not permit any other conclusion, but one will, of course, have to wait for the many yet unpublished sources in the next volumes before making a final judgement.

From the very beginning, the outcome of the Synod was used as a basis for ex-

cluding from office pastors who thought and taught differently. The President of the Synod, Johannes Bogermann, expelled the Remonstrants from the Synod on January 14, 1619. From then on, they were not even allowed to participate in discussions or confirm that their views were being correctly presented. In the end, all participants ceremonially signed not only the Belgian Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism, but also the resolutions of the Synod of Dordt.

The Grand Pensionary Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, who had supported the Arminians, was sentenced to death and beheaded just a few days after the end of the Synod in May 1619. Surely it would be too easy to see his death as occurring purely as a result of his Remonstrant position. Moritz of Orange, who thus removed his adversary, was hardly interested in theology and the Calvinist position. The death penalty was imposed for treason, namely the attempt to deprive Moritz of power or to eliminate him. Nevertheless, the blending of the competition for power in the Netherlands with theological positions shows that from the beginning there was more at stake than a friendly theological consensus.

In the aftermath of the Synod, after recognition of the results by the States General, about two hundred additional Arminian clergymen were removed from office and had to leave the Netherlands. The decisions of the Synod of Dordt had already been confirmed in France in 1620 by the National (Reformed) Synod of Alsace. Just six years after the Synod, in 1625, the Calvinists lost their most important patron through the death of the governor general Moritz of Orange. Nevertheless, the Canons of Dordt remained permanently preserved as a resolution of the Synod. At the same time, one important effect of the Synod was that henceforth the Heidelberg Cat-

echism represented the extent of theological breadth of the Reformed Church. This is also an indication that the Synod promoted a confessional character.

The decision to formulate the Canons in a popular manner, neither scholastically nor academically, and hence to explain the consequences of each point for a practical life of faith has contributed to their popularity and survival.

Besides the victory over intra-church opposition and the short-term gain of international prestige for Moritz of Orange, the main historical effect of the Synod of Dordt was probably to clearly form the Reformed confession and make it visible alongside the Lutheran confessions. It also helped to make the Netherlands—especially after the collapse of the Electoral Palatinate in the Thirty Years' War and the loss of the Faculty of Theology in Heidelberg—the leading theological center of Calvinism.

The conflict that led to the Synod began in 1603–1604 as a dispute between two professors from Leiden, Jacobus Arminius and Franciscus Gomarus. In 1610, forty-three Arminian theologians wrote a remonstrance composed of five articles. The 'Gomarists' were therefore also called 'Anti-Arminians' and 'Contra-Remonstrants'.

Arminius (1560–1609) represented the view that God had decided to save all humans, but that only those who accepted salvation with individual faith would be saved. It was thus part of man's free will, in his view, that divine grace could be resisted. Gomarus (1565–1641) followed the view of Calvin's successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza, who had radicalized Calvin to a certain extent. According to Beza, God had determined before the fall of man—that is, before sin existed—who was saved and who was lost (supralapsarianism), and therefore he did so not out of mercy but out of sovereignty and

omnipotence.

Governor Moritz of Orange, the head of the Dutch States General, passionately supported Gomarus. He arranged for a final decision in this dispute by a synod that had confirming the Calvinist doctrine of predestination as its object. The Remonstrants, headed by Leiden professor Simon Episcopius, explained their position to the foreign delegates and defended themselves before the Synod on short notice. However, they were expelled (in the fifty-seventh of the 154 meetings) after their refusal to submit to the resolutions of the Synod and to recognize its legality prior to knowing its results.

But if the condemnation of the position of Arminius had already been decided beforehand, it is surprising that Gomarus' counter-position found no majority at the Synod. Even though supralapsarianism's claim that election and condemnation preceded the creation and fall of man, thus being part of the sovereignty of God and not a consequence of his mercy, was not explicitly rejected in any Synod document, its advocates lost out as most of the foreign delegates were united in their opposition to Gomarus' position. Especially to be mentioned among the foreign opponents of Gomarus are Mathias Martinius from Bremen as well as Georg Cruciger and Rudolph Goclenius from Hessen (more precisely from Marburg).

Infralapsarianism (i.e. that election and condemnation followed the creation and fall of man, thus arising above all from God's mercy) is presumed throughout the Synod, which thereby, rather than following the strict line of Gomarus and Beza, advanced Heinrich Bullinger's more moderate position. That is all the more astonishing as Gomarus himself was a member of the Synod and had Moritz of Orange's ear!

It is hoped that the publication of these documents will, by making key documents more readily accessible, encourage more detailed research on the Synod of Dordt. I would like to thank the publisher for making possible and supporting such a complicated, laborious and extensive undertaking.

ERT (2019) 43:3, 285-287

***Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa***

**Kenneth R. Ross, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu and Todd M. Johnson (eds.)**

**Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017**

**Hb., xxi + 538 pp.**

***Reviewed by Klaus Fiedler, professor of theology and religious studies, Mzuzu University, Malawi***

Readers who have used and appreciated the *Atlas of Global Christianity*, published by Edinburgh University Press on the occasion of the centenary of the 1910 World Mission Conference, will look forward with excitement and anticipation to the new ten-volume *Edinburgh Companions of Global Christianity*—edited, like the atlas, primarily by Kenneth Ross and Todd Johnson.

Now the first volume is out, and quite appropriately it covers sub-Saharan Africa, where the Christian faith is spreading faster than anywhere else in the world. In 1910, sub-Saharan Africa was less than 10 percent Christian; now it is nearly 50 percent Christian, and by 2050 it may have 40 percent of all Christians worldwide.

This book covers Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa as a global phenomenon on three levels: a statistical and theological overview; surveys by country and of each of the major Christian traditions;

and 128 pages on 'key themes'. It also contains a concluding essay by Mercy Amba Oduyoye on 'The Future of Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa', statistical data by country, a methodological account by demographers Todd Johnson and Gina Zurlo, and a carefully prepared index.

The opening statistical overview by Zurlo is valuable due to its comprehensiveness and precision. The map of majority religions impresses by showing data not only by country but by region within each country, which makes the picture more realistic (very important for Ethiopia and Madagascar), although I have doubts about 'ethnoreligionists' being the majority religion in so many parts of Tanzania. Zurlo shows that from 1970 to 2015 the main religious change was the decline of ethnoreligionists (26.3 to 10.6 percent) and that Christianity and Islam both grew in proportion to their existing strength, thus putting to rest the perception of the 'rapid Islamization of Africa'.

In the article on 'Major Christian Trends', the sevenfold growth among Anglicans, which has made black the dominant colour in worldwide Anglicanism, is notable. Catholics and independents have also grown fivefold. Evangelicals grew from 6 to 14 percent of the total population; much attention is paid to the explosive growth in Pentecostals and charismatics (treated separately from evangelicals) from 7 to 21 percent.

The country summaries show that Middle Africa (82.5 percent) is the most Christian region of sub-Saharan Africa, whereas West Africa is the least Christian at 36.1 percent.

Though the articles all follow the pattern of answering several general questions (like church presence, church and politics, and education), they are refreshingly distinctive in their approaches. Many

of them focus on the growth of Pentecostals and charismatics, as the most current (and sometimes most disturbing) development in African Christianity. Much attention is given to the 'prosperity gospel' and its dubious effects, but sometimes this movement receives a more positive assessment as appealing to the urban and the educated.

The articles present an overall picture of Christianity in each country or area, avoiding the frequently used 'main-line and others' approach. For Nigeria, the churches originating in the Faith Missions have been fully included, and major independent churches like Aladura or Kimbanguists are equally given prominence. The considerable Christian involvement in education and health services is faithfully recorded. Descriptions and assessments of Christian political involvement vary, depending on the country and on the theological assumptions of the authors.

The third part of the book deals with cross-cutting issues. For the whole series, the following issues have been selected: faith and culture, worship and spirituality, theology, social and political context, mission and evangelism, gender, religious freedom and inter-religious relations. Three additional topics are covered in this specific volume: the Bible in African Christianity (showing both the importance of vernacular Bibles and the need to base translations on deeper Greek and Hebrew scholarship), the anthropology of evil (which is in danger of portraying the worldview of specific charismatic churches as typical for Africa), and migration (which seems to me too diverse to bring the current meaning home).

All the thematic articles struggle, in one way or another, with generalizations. A book covering a whole continent must generalize, but some generaliza-

tions are somewhat untenable, like this sentence: 'This is because the Christianity of missionaries supplies no answers to the difficulties of daily life' (p. 357). Mary Getui avoids this danger by citing specific authors (from Mbiti to Achebe) to depict the often precarious relationship of faith and culture. The article on the anthropology of evil restricts itself to three neo-charismatic churches, and John Pobee uses a piece of art depicting Christ and the martyr Bernard Mizeki to centre his argument.

I appreciate the articles by Isabel Phiri and Chammah Kaunda (on gender) and by Frans Veerman and Christof Sauer (on religious freedom) for their facticity and approach. However, I feel that Evaristi Mayoti Cornelli (on inter-religious relations) generalizes too much when he states that the missionaries demanded the 'abandonment of African values' (like the family?) and 'the adoption of European customs' (p. 413). Furthermore, Cornelli goes too far by claiming that the 'early missionaries did not believe that Africans were sufficiently developed rationally to have a religion' (p. 412). I also would like to see the evidence for the statement that when Muslims and Christians intermarry, 'these marriages usually have a hidden agenda' (p. 418). My research, though limited to Malawi and Tanzania, does not show this tendency.

I am somewhat concerned about the book's frequent glorification of the African Independent Churches. They interpreted (after the missionaries had failed) the Christian faith properly, and they related the Christian faith effectively to African culture. But a group of very different churches is all lumped together (often by ignoring the Ethiopian-type churches), and the bigger problem is their limited success. Yes, there are the Aladura, Zionist and Kimbanguist churches with millions of members, but



there are also the Zionist churches in Malawi (thirty denominations and about 100,000 members) that struggle to reach the cities and to retain their youth. Yes, they made a significant contribution, but they are not *the* African church.

I fully support Oduyoye's concluding statement: 'Today, Christianity should be accepted as one of the "traditional religions" of Africa. Having existed on the continent for over two millennia, it deserves no less an accolade.'

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***Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality***

**Nancy R. Pearcey**

**Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018**

**Hb., 335 pp., notes, index**

***Reviewed by Peirong Lin, Human Resources Director and Research Coordinator, Theological Concerns Department, World Evangelical Alliance***

Pearcey, professor of apologetics at Houston Baptist University and a former agnostic, seeks to uncover the worldview that drives the secular ethic. For her, this secular worldview is grounded in a split in public truth between facts and values—that is, between what is 'objective, true and testable' and what is 'private, subjective and relative'. Pearcey contends that this fact/value split is further worked out in the secular understanding of personhood, according to which being human is a scientific fact but being a person is an ethical concept defined subjectively by what one values. The resulting two-tiered, dualistic view of the human being has denigrated the importance of the human body in what Pearcey considers a dehumanizing way.

To demonstrate her point, Pearcey shows how this secular theory of per-

sonhood is played out in various areas of ethics: abortion, euthanasia, casual sex, homosexuality, and the impact of individual choice in the social realm. She describes people who are pro-choice regarding abortion as accepting the fact that the baby is scientifically human yet not considering it a person. Since abortion lies in the sphere of values, which is relative from a secular perspective, one can hold, with no moral consequences, the view that 'a human is but a disposable piece of matter, able to be used for research and experiments'.

In response to the practical implications of the secular theory of personhood, Pearcey ends each chapter with solutions that Christians can support, such as offering safe places where women may hand over their newborn babies.

Writing in an apologetic style, Pearcey effectively analyses the secular worldview, particularly in relation to public policy, culture and civic religion in the United States. What seems lacking is a comprehensive explication of her understanding of Christian ethics before she works out this ethic practically with respect to specific issues. At various points, Pearcey provides lucid insights on how Christian ethics addresses a particular issue (e.g. that Christian ethic is wholistic, respecting the value and dignity of our embodied existence as 'a good gift from God', in her discussion of transgenderism). However, in her desire to present Christian ethics as completely different from secular ethics on each issue, she sometimes seems needlessly combative. This is unfortunate as it limits her potential to engage effectively with non-Christians who may struggle with the issues she examines.

To some extent, Pearcey's sharp dichotomy between Christian and secular ethics is undermined when she acknowledges that Christians are frequently also

susceptible to secular ethics (such as when they hold that the body is inferior to the spirit). Of course, Christian truth is not dependent on the imperfect everyday practice of actual Christians, and Pearcey herself has long been urging Christians to overcome dualism in their own thinking. But this admission reminds us that the separation between different worldviews is not as clean as she suggests. In reality, most individuals' worldviews are actually a hybrid of

different perspectives, and in fact the understanding of the Christian worldview varies significantly across Christian theological traditions.

Nevertheless, this book remains a valuable resource for Christians, especially those dealing with the American context. Pearcey provides extensive insight on secular thinking and identifies its weaknesses on several hotly debated contemporary issues.