

THE LIMITS OF PARENTAL
RIGHTS REGARDING
TRANSGENDER CHILDREN

Jon Whitehead

SURROGATE MOTHERHOOD:
A CHRISTIAN ETHICAL
ANALYSIS

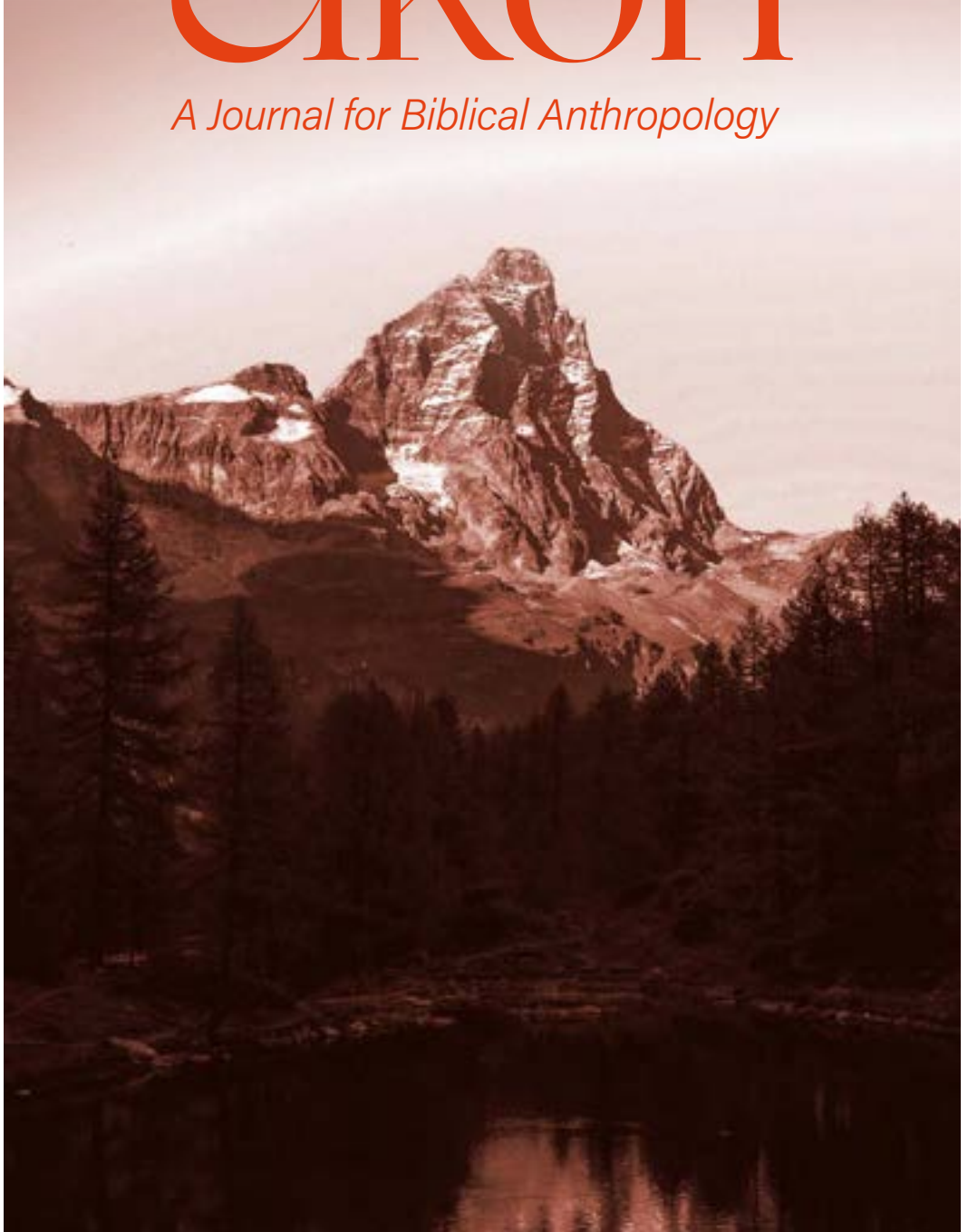
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CONFRONTING THE EMPATHY
OF SURROGACY

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Family Under Fire

Shortly after the oral arguments before the Supreme Court in *United States v. Skrametti* this past December, we decided to devote significant space in this issue of *Eikon* to the subject of parenting. We did not know then how relevant this topic would be.

At issue in the *Skrametti* case is the constitutionality of Tennessee's law banning transgender procedures on minors. This bill specifically prohibits medical interventions "[e]nabling a minor to identify with, or live as, a purported identity inconsistent with the minor's sex," as well as those "[t]reating purported discomfort or distress from a discordance between the minor's sex and asserted identity." The plaintiffs in this case argue that Tennessee's laws violate their parental rights to make medical decisions for their children, and that it unlawfully dis-

criminates on the basis of sex. To put the matter rather bluntly, by assuming the anthropological commitments of transgender ideology, these parents argue that they reserve the right to chemically and/or surgically mutilate their children.

More recently, the Supreme Court heard arguments in a case involving parents in the state of Maryland who sought an exemption for their children from school curricula that featured LGBT themes and characters. According to Montgomery County Public School's (MCPS) legal defense, "MCPS introduced into its pre-K through twelfth grade language-arts curriculum several storybooks featuring lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer characters." According to the school's lawyers, "The storybooks were added as part of MCPS's commitment to 'provid[ing] a culturally responsive . . .

curriculum that promotes equity, respect, and civility.” They further clarified that “MCPS believes that ‘[r]epresentation in the curriculum creates and normalizes a fully inclusive environment for all students’ and ‘supports a student’s ability to empathize, connect, and collaborate with diverse peers and encourages respect for all.’” The parents’ request for an exemption from this curriculum is unwarranted, says the school district, since “MCPS made clear to teachers that using the story books involves no instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity.”

The logic here seems to be that since these teachers were instructed not to explicitly encourage students to affirm the ideas and lifestyles presented in the books, the school is exempt from the scrutiny of the First Amendment. In other words, overt moral persuasion is not permissible, but the subtle indoctrination of “representation” and the “normalization” of “inclusivity” is. But those with ears to hear will recognize that the promotion of “equity, respect, and civility” in this context entails the promotion of a particular *ideology*, which is the precise issue raised by these Maryland parents.

The more recent and explosive episode at the intersection of the sexual revolution and parental rights occurred in Colorado, where their House of Representatives passed two breathtaking bills designed to codify gender ideology into Colorado’s Revised Statutes. The first bill (HB 25-1309) mandates that all healthcare plans provide coverage of transgender procedures, which the bill refers to as “gender-affirming health care.” Beyond the basics such as hormone therapy, the bill seeks to create legal provisions for what we used to colloquially refer to as “plastic surgery.” These medically



“necessary” procedures that insurers would be obligated to provide are outlined in detail, and include “blepharoplasty, eye and lid” (reconstruction of the eyelid), “face, forehead, or neck skin tightening,” “facial bone remodeling,” “cheek, chin, or nose implants,” and much, much more. Thus, if a “physical or behavioral health-care provider” (whoever this vaguely-described group is) deems that any of these interventions are necessary for a patient’s welfare, then they must be covered by insurance. Since the bill provides no age requirements, Glenn Stanton of Focus on the Family seems correct to predict that this legislation will become a “financial facilitator for children becoming gender-medicine patients for life” in a manner that “usurps the financial gate-keeping power of parents.”¹

But it gets worse. Not only do Colorado’s state representatives want to provide children easy access to a plethora of transgender procedures, they want to ensure parents have no choice but to affirm their child’s gender identity — whatever that may be. Prior to subsequent changes in the Colorado Senate, the House version of the bill (HB 25-1312) provided the state with the power to remove children from their parents’ custody if they do not affirm their child’s gender self-conception. It does so by defining “deadnaming” and “misgendering” as forms of “coercive control.” And now that the bill has been signed into law, parents who refuse to affirm their child’s transgender self-concept face the very real prospect of losing their rights of custody. All this despite data showing that children with gender dysphoria overwhelmingly grow out of this discomfort with the onset

of puberty and the growing body of literature (not that we needed it) documenting the failure of “gender-affirming care” to improve the lives of those who undertake it. There is no return on investment for defying the laws of Nature and Nature’s God.

As you can see, the topic of parenting and the rights of parents is even more relevant now than we had previously realized. In light of these recent developments, we hope in this issue of *Eikon* to set forth a biblically-informed vision of parenting, shedding light on the rights of parents, along with their role and responsibility to raise their child “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4). To this end, Colin Smothers has drawn up a summary of biblical principles on parental rights. Jonathan Whitehead reasons through the rights of parents and the role of government in an analysis of current Supreme Court cases. This issue also features articles from Tedd Tripp, C.R. Wiley, Joel Beeke, and Mark Copping, who provide historical, practical, and theological perspective on raising children. Readers will also benefit from Josh Blount’s insightful analysis of Abigail Shrier’s *Bad Therapy* and Jonathan Haidt’s *Anxious Generation*, two important books that have much to commend in their diagnosis of the issues plaguing America’s adolescents.

We also take notice of reproductive trends and technologies that are changing the way people are becoming parents today. David Closson examines America’s emerging pronatalism, arguing that a “merely pronatalist” approach to solving

¹ Glenn T. Stanton, “Two Ghastly Bills in Colorado: Legislation Would Force Parents and Schools to Abandon Transgender Youth to Their Life-Altering Confusion,” *WORLD*, April 9, 2025, <https://wng.org/opinions/two-ghastly-bills-in-colorado-1744169229>.

our demographic decline will ultimately fall short in honoring God's intended design for the family and procreation. Emma Waters explores the "childbearing revolution" created by in vitro fertilization (IVF), while Katy Faust and J. Alan Branch contribute much-needed essays on the growing but underdiscussed phenomenon of surrogacy. At the heart of all these matters lay the dignity of human life and God's creational norms for the family and procreation as revealed in nature and Scripture. These authors challenge us to consider the moral and practical implications of modern practices that contradict or thwart God's design for the formation of families.

There is much more in the remaining essays and book reviews that we commend to you. As anthropological battles continue to ravage our culture, CBMW seeks to serve the church by remaining fervently and faithfully committed to promoting the truths of Scripture, shining biblical light in the midst of an age of disorder and confusion. We pray this issue of *Eikon* reflects that aim. ✕

Jonathan E. Swan is Executive Editor of Eikon



A Return to Protestant Catechesis

Children are a gift from the Lord. Instructing one's children to follow the Lord is a sacred undertaking, filled with both deep challenges and profound joys. But it is also a duty. While many such examples can be proffered from Scripture, only two will suffice. After God constituted his redeemed people Israel into a nation, he gave them laws by which they were to live together in righteousness and receive his blessing. For this reason, the Lord commanded the Israelite parents to teach their children these laws, instructing them, "You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You

shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (Deut 6:7–9).

Clearly, God expected his people to prioritize frequent and daily instruction of his statutes. More than that, these instructions cast a vision of parenting as a comprehensive lifestyle of discipleship (see Deut 6:20–25). This same expectation can be reasonably imported into Paul's command to fathers in the church in Ephesus when he called upon them to bring up their children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4). In brief, the Scriptures teach us to consider it a matter beyond question that parents have a responsibility to teach their children God's Word and instruct them in obedience. Indeed, the Bible teaches us to consider this task as every

parent's most significant responsibility.

THE STATE OF CHRISTIAN PARENTING TODAY

But how are parents to accomplish this important task? And how are parents doing in this work today? Before offering a suggestion about the former question, let me provide some insight on the latter. It is not going well. While a shrewd observer may have already surmised this conclusion based on anecdotal observation, the following data may serve to confirm.

George Barna's research suggests that as little as nine percent of those who profess to be a Christian have a biblical worldview.¹ To further illustrate this sad reality, in an even more recent study, Barna found that among those who are "theologically-identified, Born-Again Christians," just twenty-four percent believe the doctrine of the Trinity. And of those whom Barna claims "possess a biblical worldview," still only sixty-two percent claim to believe in the Trinitarian God of Scripture.² Given the fundamental nature of the Trinity to biblical orthodoxy, these surveys paint a sobering picture of the church today.

But Barna is not the only researcher who has found evidence of spiritual malnu-

trition. Ligonier Ministry and LifeWay's *The State of Theology*, a research survey designed to "take the theological temperature of the United States," yields similarly abysmal results. According to their most recent survey, roughly half of evangelicals deny God's immutability and omniscience; nearly two-thirds believe we are born in a state of innocence; and a full forty-three percent believe "Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God."³

Parents, unsurprisingly, have not escaped this spiritual lethargy, as only two percent of those with preteens at home have a biblical worldview. This number is a mere four percent for parents of "self-identified Christians," and eight percent for "Theologically defined born-again Christians."⁴ From these numbers a significant problem emerges: the impossibility of parents teaching their children a faith they themselves do not have. But how could we expect more from evangelicals, given that only a little more than half of their pastors evince a biblical worldview?⁵ When the shepherds themselves fail to live up to the biblical standard of orthodoxy, we cannot expect their flocks to thrive.

While the larger state of the church and its leaders is beyond the scope of this es-

¹ George Barna, "American Worldview Inventory 2021: Release #6: What Does It Mean When People Say They Are 'Christian'" Cultural Research Center, August 31, 2021, https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CRC_AWVI2021_Release06_Digital_01_20210831.pdf.

² George Barna, "Most Americans—Including Christian Churchgoers—Reject the Trinity," Cultural Research Center, March 26, 2025, https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/AWVI-2025_03_Most-Americans-Reject-the-Trinity_FINAL_03_26_2025.pdf. Clearly, one cannot have an orthodox, biblical worldview apart from a belief in the Trinity. Nevertheless, Barna's research indicates that, according to his research, even among the cohort with a worldview most consistent with Scripture, the doctrine of the Trinity is not strongly believed.

³ Their most recent survey can be found here: <https://thestateoftheology.com>

⁴ George Barna, *American Worldview Inventory 2022–23: The Annual Report on the State of Worldview in the United States* (Glendale, AZ: Arizona Christian University Press, 2023), 17.

⁵ George Barner, *American Worldview Inventory 2022–23*, 43–48. These findings were also published online, "American Worldview Inventory 2022: Release #5: Shocking Results Concerning the Worldview of Christian Pastors," Cultural Research Center, May 10, 2022, https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/AWVI2022_Release05_Digital.pdf.

say, I would suggest that at least one reason for its current condition is a lack of systematic, doctrinal teaching. In short, the American church has failed to catechize herself in Christian doctrine. And for parents who seek to raise their children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4), they must seek out and employ faithful methods of doing so.

THE ANCIENT PATHS OF CATECHESIS

Enter catechism. Many Protestants today are unfamiliar with the term, or associate it with the Roman Catholic Church. This situation is tragic, since catechisms have been part of the Protestant tradition since its inception, and the process of catechesis has been the practice of the church since its founding. The English term *catechesis* derives from the Greek word *κατηχέω* (*katēcheō*), which appears eight times in the New Testament in reference to the reporting of information (e.g., Acts 21:21, 24) or to the act of instructing — most often in reference to Christian teachings (e.g., Acts 18:5).⁶ Over the history of the church, the term has taken on a more technical sense denoting a formal process of teaching fundamental Christian truth.⁷

In the early church, catechesis in the general sense took on various forms according to the discipleship needs of the church. It involved verbal instruction on the basics

of the Christian faith, which included doctrinal, moral, and liturgical elements, often centering around the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ Creed. Ambrose, for instance, required his catechumens (those being taught in preparation of baptism) to recite and memorize his teachings. During these early centuries of the church, catechesis was used for multiple purposes. It could be used to prepare candidates for baptism, to instruct new believers in Christian faith and practice, in preparation for initiation, or to inform pagan or Jewish unbelievers of Christianity. Regardless of the exact method or specific purpose of catechesis, it always involved instruction in the rudiments of the Christian faith.⁸

While it was during the Middle Ages that catechisms developed into the question-and-answer format for which they are known today, catechesis in the broader sense took on new significance during the Protestant reformation.⁹ At this time, the Reformers sought to inculcate the doctrines of the reformation in their churches and distinguish their teachings from the Roman Catholic Church as well as other emerging Protestant sects. To this end, catechisms became strategic tools for the reform and discipleship efforts of these fledgling churches.

As we seek to renew the church and Christian families today, Protestants would do well to consider the examples from two

⁶ Moisés Silva, Revision Editor, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: 2014), 2:647–648.

⁷ It should be noted that “It is less clear whether the [verb] *κατηχέω* had yet become a technical term for Christian instruction...In any case, the use of this [verb] in the NT supplied the early Christians with a specific word for an essential aspect both of their evangelistic work and of their church life: teaching the saving acts of God.” Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2:648.

⁸ Angelo Di Berardino, Ed. *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 1:443–457.

⁹ “Catechesis — that is, basic Christian instruction — was a staple of the church from its earliest times. The rise of catechisms in the form with which we are now familiar — pedagogical tools structured by questions and answers to be learned by heart — arose in the Middle Ages, probably at the hands of one Bruno Würzburg in the eleventh century.” Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 109. Thomas Nettles calls this period “The Golden Age of catechisms.” Thomas J. Nettles, *Teaching Truth, Training Hearts: The Study of Catechisms in Baptist Life*, rev. ed. (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2017), 12.

of their most admired forefathers.

The German Reformer Martin Luther's (1483–1546) two catechisms comprised a vital aspect of his ministry and shaped the character of future catechisms among Protestants.¹⁰ Luther published his *Large* and *Small* catechisms in 1529 as part of his broader education and discipleship strategy among the German people, which were designed to provide necessary doctrinal instruction to pastors, parents, and children.¹¹ He wrote these catechisms to remedy what he saw as the gross ignorance of biblical truth among the people — as well as the pastors — of Germany. (A situation that is in some respects not too unlike ours today.) The *Large Catechism*, he explained, “contains what every Christian should know. Anyone who does not know it should not be numbered among Christians nor admitted to any sacrament.” In other words, it comprised a compendium of necessary, biblical basics. As a form of doctrinal teachings “for the instruction of children and the uneducated,” Luther insisted that “it is the duty of every head of a household at least once a week to examine the children and servants one after the other and ascertain what they know or have learned of it, and, if they do not know it, to keep them faithfully at it.”¹² Luther, therefore, conceived of catechesis as a responsibility not only of pastors, but also of parents.

The next generation of reformers, such as

John Calvin (1509–1564), also recognized the importance of catechesis for the reformation of families and the church. After Calvin and his fellow Genevan pastors lobbied the civil magistrate to impose a requirement for children to be taught the basics of Christianity, Calvin composed a brief catechism, *Instruction and Confession of Faith* (1537), to facilitate their instruction.¹³ Later, Calvin composed a more expansive catechism, *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva* (1541), which served as an influential doctrinal standard and valuable theological curriculum and teaching manual. Due to its size, it was subsequently published as weekly lessons for more manageable consumption.¹⁴ Additionally, pastors opted to compose their own abridgements of the catechism so that young children could memorize it. A popular abridgement at this time, entitled *The French ABCs*, included an abbreviated catechism along with the French ABCs, a table for learning numbers up to 100, and basic Christian teachings such as the Lord's Prayer and Ten Commandments. Clearly, the reformers in Geneva believed learning biblical doctrine was at least as important and foundational to the Christian life as learning one's numbers and ABCs.¹⁵

While schools and pastors played a central role in the catechizing the people of Geneva, parents were expected to catechize their own children, or to at least make sure they attended the established public oppor-

¹⁰ Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: 1517, Printing, and the Making of the Reformation* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 262.

¹¹ For introductions on how Luther's catechisms fit into his reform efforts, see Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 259–266. True-man, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 109–155. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, Eds., “Editors' Introduction to the Small Catechism” and “Editors' Introduction to the Large Catechism” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 345–347, 377–379.

¹² Martin Luther, “Preface,” *The Book of Concord*, 383.

¹³ Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 19.

¹⁴ Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 267n68.

¹⁵ Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 267–269.



tunities for catechesis, such as the weekly Sunday catechism sermon. To this end, the Genevan magistrates once made a public announcement that “all fathers of families should be diligent in instructing both their children and their male and female servants, and require them to attend sermons and catechism classes.”¹⁶ To the reformed in Geneva, the parents’ duty — with the responsibility falling principally on the head of the home — to catechize their children was not considered secondary or optional.

Although Calvin’s initial efforts were cut short by his removal from Geneva, one of his terms for returning included compulsory catechesis.¹⁷ The reason for Calvin’s insistence on this point is powerfully stated in a letter he wrote to Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, and Regent of England under Edward VI, advising him on how to pursue spiritual reform:

Believe me, Monseigneur, the Church of God will never preserve itself without a Catechism, for it is like the seed to keep the good grain from dying out, and causing it to multiply from age to age. And therefore, if you desire to build an

edifice which shall be of long duration, and which shall not soon fall into decay, make provision for the children being instructed in a good Catechism, which may shew them briefly, and in language level to their tender age, wherein true Christianity consists.¹⁸

Calvin’s conviction about the necessity of catechism was not unique to him. Virtually all the reformers engaged in systematic catechesis. In Calvin’s case, he and his fellow Genevan pastors merely copied the playbook of other reformers.¹⁹ Their strategy would continue across Europe during the Reformation and post-Reformation period, encompassing nearly the whole of the emerging Protestantism.

A RETURN TO PROTESTANT CATECHESIS

To answer the question above regarding how parents are to instruct their children, might I suggest that parents imitate Calvin, who imitated Luther and the other reformers, who imitated sundry Christians through the early church and middle ages, and adopt a strategy of catechesis. The historic Protestant

¹⁶ Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, 269.

¹⁷ Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, 266

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Tracts and Letters: Volume 5: Letters, Part 2 1545–1553* ed. Jules Bonnet, trans David Constable (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 5:191.

¹⁹ Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, 19, 266.

catechisms, of which there are many, have stood the test of time and provide systematic summaries of essential Christian truths. The straightforward structure of these question-and-answer catechisms offer a simple, yet profound method for introducing children to the central doctrines of the faith. These carefully curated and constructed questions and responses inculcate children into a theological grammar — “a pattern of sound words” (2 Tim 1:13) — that forms a foundational framework on which they can grow in their understanding and ability to communicate the truths of Scripture.

Christian parents do not need to complicate the matter of discipling their children. Parenting is already challenging enough. Nor should parents delegate their discipleship responsibility to pastors, Sunday school teachers, youth pastors, or other church leaders. While the public ministry of the Word and sacrament within the covenant community is vitally important to the formation of all Christians, the role of the home in discipleship is paramount.

Obedience to the commands of Deuteronomy 6 and Ephesians 6 call for the simple and consistent practice of the ordinary means of grace in the home: Scripture reading, instruction, and prayer. To this end I know of no improvement upon the practice of catechesis that our Protestant forebears used to bring reformation to the Church. After all, our faith is, by the gracious work of God, the fruit of their spiritual legacy. For this reason, parents would be wise to follow the advice of the Puritan pastor William Gouge (1575–1653),²⁰ who taught parents how to follow

the ancient paths of catechesis:

Let children be catechized constantly from day to day: *rehearse them continually unto thy children*, saith the Law [Deut 6:7]. That which is *daily* done, is in Scripture said to be done *continually*: as the sacrifice which was daily offered was called *a continually offering*. Here let this *caveat* be noted, that in giving this spiritual food, parents deal with their children, as skillful nurses and mothers do in feeding infants: they will not at once cram more into their mouths, then their stomach is able to digest, but they will rather oft feed them with a little: so it is not meet, that parents be too tedious; that will but dull a child's understanding, and breed wearisomeness, and make it loath to be again instructed: but *precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, and there a little* [Isa 28:10]. Thus shall they learn with ease and delight: and this being oft performed, in time a great measure of knowledge will be gained thereby. If a vessel has a little mouth, we use not to fill it by pouring whole pailfuls upon it, for so all may be spilt, and it receive little or nothing; but we let the liquor fall in by little and little, according to the capacity of the mouth; so is nothing lost, and the vessel filled the sooner. Thus are children to be dealt with.²¹ ✕

Jonathan E. Swan is
Executive Editor of *Eikon*

²⁰ For a brief introduction to Gouge, see Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans: With a Guide to Modern Reprints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 284–289.

²¹ This quotation has been lightly modernized from William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties: Eight Treatises* (London: Printed by John Haviland for William Bladen, 1622), 540.

Principles on Parental Rights and Child Flourishing



1. God's creation of mankind as male and female in His image grounds human dignity, undergirds the institution of marriage, and establishes the natural family through procreation (Gen 1:27–28; 2:24).
2. God has established the family prior to the state to be the first and foundational unit of society for maximal human flourishing, and thus the family enjoys certain rights, responsibilities, priorities, and privileges.
3. God's good, creational design gives children to fathers and mothers (Gen 4:1; Ps 127:3), a stewardship accompanied by parental rights and duties ordered to a child's good to provide for, to protect, to nurture, and to educate their own children to full maturity without interference.

4. These God-given parental rights and duties complement and do not negate the rights of a child to be nourished, to grow, to develop body and soul, to be educated, and to reach adulthood in bodily integrity, including with their procreative potential intact.
5. Neither parents nor the state are authorized to facilitate a minor child undergoing irreversible therapies and/or surgeries aimed at changing their God-assigned biological identity as male or female.
6. The law rightly acknowledges that a minor child cannot consent to adult sexual activity, so also should the law recognize that a child cannot consent to any medical interventions, including hormones and surgeries, that would inhibit their future sexual and reproductive capacities.
7. It is becoming increasingly common for many in the medical, educational, and legal sectors to encroach upon God-given parental rights to raise their own children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4) and to educate them according to God’s commands (Deut 6:6–7; Prov 22:6).
8. Parents have a God-given stewardship and priority to raise and educate their own children, rather than the state, medical professionals, teachers, or counselors.
9. It is to act against Nature and Nature’s God for courts to strip custody from parents who oppose their child’s so-called gender transition.
10. Parents should exercise their God-given rights and duties ordered to the good of their own children, under the authority of God, recognizing that they will be held accountable for their choices (Matt 25:14-30).



11. When God’s good design for the family breaks down, God authorizes the state to intervene (Rom 13:1–4; 1 Pet 2:13–14), particularly in the case of an established pattern of abuse or neglect, but always in pursuit of promoting the natural family and never denigrating or attempting to replace it.
12. Churches, pastors, and Christians of goodwill everywhere should advocate for policies and practices that support and strengthen the family unit, and should oppose any and all legal and cultural efforts aimed at undermining the natural family, breaking the bond between parent and child, or rejecting God’s good design for male and female created in his image. ✕

Colin J. Smothers is Executive Director of CBMW.

Limits of Parental Rights Regarding Transgender Children





THE LAW AND PARENTAL RIGHTS

Some of the thorniest issues in our culture are occurring at the overlap of church, state, and family.

Modern evangelicals are, perhaps, most comfortable thinking of these things as *separate*. The Baptists largely convinced most Reformed Protestants of some kind of separation between church and state. Abraham Kuyper famously described “sphere sovereignty,” in which government, church, and family maintain independent and inviolate charters directly from Scripture. Thus, the state cannot interfere in the church; the family remains separate from the church, and vice versa.

But individuals, of course, have duties to each sphere, and each sphere has duties to individuals. Like the Venn diagrams that confused us in high school, if some areas are clearly separate, there are also areas that touch or overlap. Defining these boundaries can be demanding.

These questions are especially difficult when family, church, or state try to push beyond their realm of jurisdiction, or fail to fulfill the duties within their right jurisdiction.

The United States Supreme Court has taken up two cases this term that concern the overlap of the state and the

family. The court is not a stranger to church and state separation, the topic of the Constitution's First Amendment. But it rarely speaks about the relationship of state and family — in part, because family relations are usually considered a matter for individual states. But when it does speak, it tends not to speak again on the issue for years or decades. So evangelicals should have a keen interest in the arguments considered and the opinions rendered this term, as we may be stuck working out the implications for some time to come.

U.S. v. Skrametti

The first of the cases is *U.S. v. Skrametti*. In 2023, the State of Tennessee adopted a law that prohibits doctors from claiming to offer treatments that involve allowing “a minor to identify with, or live as, a purported identity inconsistent with the minor’s sex” or to treat “purported discomfort or distress from a discordance between the minor’s sex and asserted identity.”

Tennessee’s law effectively banned the use of hormones to change a minor’s “gender identity” or to use drugs to delay puberty. It also banned surgical interventions that try to alter the genitals of minors, or remove the breasts of females, in the belief this would alleviate the child’s discomfort with their sex.

Three “transgender” minors, represented by their parents, sued to enjoin the law, asking to gain access to banned treatments. Under the direction of then-President Joseph Biden, the Department of Justice joined the suit, and argued the law violates the equal protection clause of the United States. In recent days, after Donald Trump was returned to office by voters, the Department notified the Supreme Court that it has changed position, and now agrees the law is Constitutional. So the case will return to its original configuration: a claim of three families against the power of the state to interfere with their healthcare decisions.

Mahmoud v. Taylor

In *Mahmoud*, the Montgomery County (Maryland) Board of Education required elementary students to sit

through a curriculum celebrating gender transitions, Pride parades, and same-sex romance between young children. As an example, the “Pride Puppy” book asked students to identify items commonly seen at Pride parades, like “leather” and “drag queen.” An activity with “Jacob’s Room to Choose,” required students to parade with placards that proclaim “Bathrooms Are For Every Bunny.”

Despite warnings from school staff that the curriculum was not appropriate for these children, the District insisted that students learn gender ideology as “fact,” and even shame students who resisted the teaching. Teachers were instructed to be dismissive of students’ religious beliefs if they differed. At first the District offered notice to parents, consistent with other types of “sex education,” and an opportunity to opt out. But it later reversed course and decided the story-book curriculum would be mandatory.

When many families complained — including many Muslim and Eastern Orthodox parents — the Board compared them to bigots and “white supremacists.”

Three families sued — two Muslim, one Christian (Catholic and Orthodox) — alleging that the schools have burdened the families’ free exercise of religion by subjecting them to education in conflict with the parents’ religious convictions.

Two lower courts rejected the parents’ arguments, holding that the government’s curriculum did not discriminate or “coerce” these young students to change their beliefs.

The families in *Mahmoud* argue that they should be protected under the rule of a 1972 case, *Wisconsin v. Yoder*. *Yoder* was one of the rare cases where the Supreme Court had had occasion to address the rights of religious parents against public schools. In *Yoder*, Amish parents were convicted of violating compulsory school laws by refusing to send their children to school past the eighth grade. The rule did not discriminate; Wisconsin said all children had to attend school. But the Supreme Court held that compulsory schooling “interposes a serious

barrier to the integration of the Amish child into the Amish religious community.”

The *Yoder* court held that the Amish had established a First Amendment right to an exception from the general rule. “A State’s interest in universal education, however highly we rank it, is not totally free from a balancing process when it impinges on fundamental rights and interests, such as those specifically protected by the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment, and the traditional interest of parents with respect to the religious upbringing of their children.” The Court recognized that “exposing Amish children to worldly influences in terms of attitudes, goals, and values contrary to beliefs,” would harm the child’s integration in his family and faith communities, at a crucial age.

WHAT ARE EVANGELICALS TO THINK?

Mahmoud and *Skrmetti* both involve families seeking to limit the power of the state. One asserts the right of parents to direct not just the medical care of the child, but the right to decide the child’s “gender identity.” The other asserts the rights of religious parents to seek an exception from public school during the presentation of objectionable curriculum.

As an evangelical parent, it might be tempting to settle for a default rule that “parents know best.” After all, that provides us with the maximum authority in our own homes. Our children are unlikely to have gender dysphoria, and we’re much more likely to have concerns about state intrusion.

Another reflexively appealing rule might be “Christianity should win.” That means the parents can’t change a child’s gender, but perhaps there is a danger in letting “religion” justify exceptions from the law. After all, there are non-Christian claims for exemption from general laws that we would find unacceptable. “Honor killings” shouldn’t be a permissible exception from murder laws; why would we let practitioners of false religions school their children in teachings that might encourage those evils?

But neither of those reflexive rules matches the details of our historical, Protestant legal and theological traditions — and I believe the First Amendment, in the context of the Founding era, is an example of that tradition.

First, the Supreme Court has been correct to hold, despite any language on the topic in the Constitution, that parents have a fundamental and natural right in the education and upbringing of children. Normally, we can expect the decisions of parents to be made in the best interests of their children. And absent exceptional evidence, neither the state nor the church has paramount rights to make those decisions. This is consistent with the creation order of the institutions in the Bible, where the family is created before the other institutions.

Second, Protestants have long agreed that the state does have legitimate authority to use force or compulsion to protect citizens from evil — and that includes situations where the family has failed to protect the physi-



cal well-being of the individual. Unlike Roman law, our Constitution does not give parents the power of life and death over their children. And, thanks be to God, the Supreme Court has struck down *Roe v. Wade*, which held that states cannot interfere with a mother's decision to kill a child before birth. In practice, most states still allow abortion (whether by surgery or drug). Protestants have long rejected a state that stands by while children are murdered or mutilated no matter the intention of the parents. "Parents always win" is not our theological or legal tradition.

Third, the Protestant tradition has also been reluctant to use coercion to force men and women to violate their religious conscience — even when that conscience is wrong. And that tradition includes granting religious exemptions to general rules, where it can be done without depriving the state of achieving its compelling interests.

These three principles have had broad consensus among Protestants generally, and among Americans in particular. Each of them reflects human efforts to protect a God-ordained duty: duty to family, duty to our fellow citizens, and duty to God. Of course, at the edges these principles are subject to fierce debate. But we should not want to see our Supreme Court easily discard any of them.

Under these three principles, I believe *Mahmoud* should be decided consistent with *Yoder*. The families should

“the state has no compelling reason to override their educational decisions about gender and sexuality”

be expected to make decisions in the best interest of their children. Their requests do not present a danger to the lives of their children. Even though we disagree with the theology of some of the parents, and believe that theological disagreements are a matter of heaven and hell, the state has no compelling reason to override their educational decisions about gender and sexuality. To the extent the state (and the church) disagree about their duty to God, this is not a situation where the state should use the sword to compel attendance.

Skrmetti, on the other hand, clearly does involve permanent damage to a child's body, by drug or surgery. And so where a parent's decisions would prevent the natural and healthy development of the child, the state has an interest in using the sword to restrain them. The family that is supposed to protect the child's body has become a threat. That protection does not depend on a parent's sincerity, or even their doctor's sincerity. It does not depend on the family's philosophical or religious motivation. Threats of physical harm to a minor justify state intervention, and Tennessee's law should be upheld even when it interferes with parental rights.

But *Skrmetti*, like *Roe*, also shows the impossibility of the state using "science" or "medicine" or even "choice" as a substitute for metaphysical principles; these fields cannot tell us the true nature of men and women. "Scientists" in thrall to a certain moral view will tell you, sincerely, that "man" and "woman" are matters of belief and choice. Some women, quite sincerely, will tell you their "freedom" is harmed without freedom to abort. Some parents will sincerely support bodily mutilation, fearful that their child will choose suicide to avoid natural development.

I am ultimately skeptical that even "natural law," as much as I find it to be a helpful tool that is embedded in our history and jurisprudence, can ultimately be judged without some presuppositions that must be tested against Scripture. In deciding which actions to restrain, and which actions to encourage, the state cannot avoid making some determination about what is "evil" or "harmful" to a human.



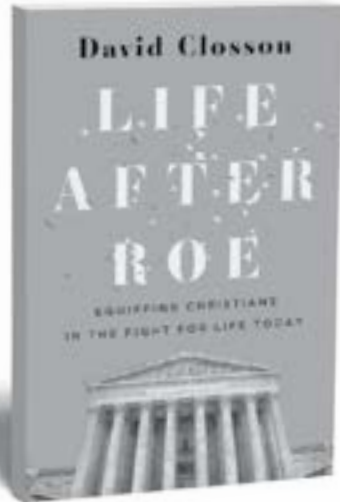
My own Baptist tradition opposes the use of force to establish a state church, or to punish religious opinions, in part due to Jesus' command to let the wheat and the tares grow together (Matt 13:29). Other American Protestants (including Presbyterians and Anglicans) have largely joined in this consensus. I still think it is right to offer special solicitude to religious activity that does not interfere with the Government's interests. But every project proposing to substitute a "religion-free" or "morality-free" basis to decide "evil" has turned up short — and often in grotesque ways.

As a lawyer and a Christian, I pray the Supreme Court preserves these important traditions — and that we will become a better nation for it. ✕

*Jonathan Whitehead is a lawyer near Kansas City, Missouri and First Amendment litigator; he served as co-counsel in *Trinity Lutheran v. Comer* (2017), and *Carson v. Makin* (2022), challenging government discrimination against religion.*

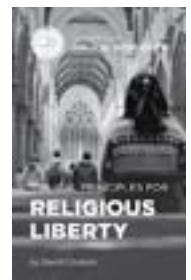


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Our Pronatalist Moment:

A Christian Evaluation

OUR PRONATALIST MOMENT: A CHRISTIAN EVALUATION

Four days after being sworn in as the nation's fiftieth vice president, J.D. Vance stood on stage at the nation's premier pro-life event and declared, "I want more babies in the United States of America."¹ Vance's remarks were not unexpected, as he had a strong pro-life voting record during his two years in the U.S. Senate. However, his comments were received by many through the lens of a growing cultural debate: the pronatalism movement. Supporters of this movement celebrated the statement as a sign that their views were entering the political mainstream. Conversely, critics expressed concern, seeing it as a troubling endorsement of a worldview they believe threatens environmental sustainability and undermines women's autonomy.

The early months of President Donald Trump's second term have ushered in a series of significant pro-life policy initiatives. Shortly after taking office, Trump pardoned twenty-three pro-life activists who had been convicted under the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances (FACE) Act during the Biden administration, rescinded multiple pro-abortion executive orders, and reinstated the Mexico City Policy, which prohibits U.S. tax dollars from funding organizations that perform or promote abortion

abroad. Additionally, the United States rejoined the Geneva Consensus Declaration, which affirms that "there is no international right to abortion."²

The Trump administration has also embraced policies championed by pronatalist advocates. On February 18, the president signed an executive order titled "Expanding Access to In Vitro Fertilization." Although the order did not change existing policy, it acknowledged "family formation" as a national priority and emphasized that "our public policy must make it easier for loving and longing mothers and fathers to have children."³ Furthermore, in late January, Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy issued a memo directing the department to "give preference to communities with marriage and birth rates higher than the national average."⁴ Both the in vitro fertilization (IVF) order and the Department of Transportation memo drew international attention, with commentators suggesting they reflected the growing influence of pronatalist ideologues within the administration.⁵

There is no doubt that pronatalism, the belief that having more children is both a personal virtue and a social good, is gaining traction in the United States and Europe. But what is driving this renewed interest in family and fertility from political parties in Europe and tech elites in Silicon Valley? More importantly, how

¹ "Full Speech: Catholic Vice President JD Vance Speaks at the March for Life 2025," *National Catholic Register*, January 24, 2025, <https://www.ncregister.com/news/jd-vance-addresses-the-march-for-life-2025-full-text>.

² "Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women's Health and Strengthening the Family," The Institute for Women's Health, 2020, <https://www.theiwh.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Geneva-Consensus-Declaration-GCD-English-2024.pdf>.

³ The White House, "Expanding Access to In Vitro Fertilization," executive order, February 18, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/expanding-access-to-in-vitro-fertilization/>.

⁴ U.S. Department of Transportation, "Ensuring Reliance upon Sound Economic Analysis in Department of Transportation Policies, Programs, and Activities," order, January 29, 2025, 3, https://www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/2025-02/ DOT_2100.7-Ensuring_Reliance_Upon_Sound_Economic_Analysis_in_DOT_Policies.pdf.

⁵ Carter Sherman, "The rise of pronatalism: why Musk, Vance and the right want women to have more babies," *The Guardian*, March 11, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/11/what-is-pronatalism-right-wing-republican>.

should Christians respond to pronatalist arguments? Is the biblical command to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28) compatible with the goals of a movement often led by individuals who do not share a biblical worldview?

LOW BIRTH RATES FUEL PRONATALIST RHETORIC AND POLICY

The current pronatalist movement is largely fueled by one undeniable reality: a growing fertility crisis. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the birth rate in the United States hit a record low in 2023, averaging just 1.62 births per woman — well below the replacement rate of 2.1.⁶ Fewer babies today mean fewer working-age adults in the future. A shrinking workforce can lead to labor shortages, reduced productivity, and the risk of long-term economic stagnation. It also places greater strain on social welfare programs like Social Security. An aging population also affects military readiness and eldercare.

If this trend is not reversed, America’s demographic decline poses an existential threat. This “birth dearth,” as Emma Waters has called it, is the driving concern behind much of today’s pronatalist advocacy.⁷

And the United States is far from alone.

Every developed nation except Israel is facing the prospect of demographic decline. In some countries, fertility rates have reached alarmingly low levels. For example, Japan’s birthrate fell to 1.2 in 2023.⁸ South Korea, which now has the lowest fertility rate in the world, hit a record low of 0.72 in 2023, although it rose slightly to 0.75 in 2024.⁹

In response to the alarmingly low birth rate in the United States, a range of proposals have been put forward. For instance, the Institute for Family Studies recently launched a Pronatalism Initiative that recommends, among other measures, expanding the Child Tax Credit — a policy both major presidential candidates endorsed during the recent election.¹⁰ Other proposed solutions include broadening access to IVF, investing in artificial womb technology, and exploring emerging reproductive innovations such as in vitro gametogenesis (IVG).

Meanwhile, European governments have implemented various incentives to combat declining birth rates. For example, Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán Viktor announced last week that mothers with one child will be exempt from paying income tax until turning thirty; mothers with two or more children will be exempt from paying income tax for life.¹¹ In Po-

⁶ Brady E. Hamilton, Joyce A. Martin, and Michelle J.K. Osterman, “Births: Provisional Data for 2023,” *Vital Statistics Rapid Release*, no. 35, April 2024, 3, <https://dx.doi.org/10.15620/cdc:151797>.

⁷ Emma Waters, “The birth dearth gives rise to pro-natalism,” *WORLD*, July 8, 2024, <https://wng.org/opinions/the-birth-dearth-gives-rise-to-pro-natalism-1720432594>.

⁸ Jennifer Jett, “Japan’s Births Fell to a Record Low in 2024,” *NBC News*, March 1, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/japans-births-fell-record-low-2024-rcna193950>.

⁹ Julian Ryall, “South Korea records birth rate rise,” *Deutsche Welle*, March 4, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/south-korea-records-birth-rate-rise/a-71812274>.

¹⁰ Lyman Stone, “Pronatal Policy Ideas for 2025,” Institute for Family Studies, October 22, 2024, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/pronatal-policy-ideas-for-2025>; Aimee Picchi, “Harris wants to give a \$6,000 tax credit to parents of newborns. Here’s what to know,” *CBS News*, last updated August 19, 2024, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/kamala-harris-child-tax-credit-6000-dnc-what-to-know/>.

¹¹ Viktor Orbán (@PM_ViktorOrban), X post, March 20, 2024, 11:00 a.m., https://x.com/PM_ViktorOrban/status/1901287411038269614.

land, families receive a monthly payment of approximately 125 USD per child, with additional tax credits for larger families.¹² Similarly, in Russia, families are given a lump-sum payment of about 7,500 USD upon the birth of a second child.¹³

CRITIQUES AND EXCESSES OF PRONATALISM

In 2023, Miriam Cates, a Member of the British Parliament, drew national attention when she asserted that the “one overarching threat to British conservatism, and indeed the whole of Western society” is liberal individualism’s failure to deliver babies.¹⁴ Cates’s comments ignited a flurry of criticism from commentators across the British media.

One headline in *The Guardian* proclaimed, “Conservative calls for women to have more babies hide pernicious motives,” arguing that Cates’s pronatalist stance masked efforts to reinforce traditional gender roles.¹⁵ Similarly, the leftist American publication *Jacobin* claimed that pronatalism has grown in postcommunist states with the effect of “reversing the relative autonomy of women under socialism and reestablishing ‘traditional’ patriarchal family structures.”¹⁶ Feminist critics strongly objected to pronatalist rhetoric and policies, believing they relegate women to second-class status. Abortion advocates opposed any initiatives that could weaken or undermine abortion access.

While many critiques of the contemporary pronatalist movement typically fail to acknowledge or respect the dignity of the unborn, there are indeed aspects of the movement that warrant closer scrutiny — and, in some cases, rightfully deserve condemnation by Christians. One



¹² Yasmeen Serhan, “Poland’s Case for ‘Family Values,’” *The Atlantic*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/10/poland-family-values-cash-handouts/599968/>.

¹³ “Poland Court Ruling Halts ‘LGBT-Free Zone’ Town Funding,” *BBC News*, January 15, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51120165>.

¹⁴ John Duggan, “National Conservatism Comes to the U.K.,” *First Things*, May 18, 2023, <https://firstthings.com/national-conservatism-comes-to-the-uk/>.

¹⁵ Kenan Malik, “Conservative calls for women to have more babies hide pernicious motives,” *The Guardian*, August 6, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentis-free/2023/aug/06/conservative-calls-women-more-babies-hide-pernicious-motives>.

¹⁶ Emily Baughan, “The European Right’s ‘Pro-Family’ Turn Is Just Austerity in Disguise,” *Jacobin*, August 7, 2023, <https://jacobin.com/2023/08/conservative-party-uk-pronatalism-childcare-patriarchy-xenophobia>.



notable example is the rise of pronatalist rhetoric within Silicon Valley.

Although many who embrace pronatalism do so out of concern for declining birth rates, the version promoted by Silicon Valley elites has taken a more troubling and technocratic turn. Recently, there has been a focus on technologies aimed at creating genetically “superior” children. For example, new companies, like Orchid — a fertility company launched in 2021 — utilize embryonic polygenic screening that allows prospective parents to screen for conditions that involve multiple genes, including some non-life threatening conditions such as

diabetes and various neurodevelopmental and psychiatric disorders.

At the same time, researchers have dedicated attention to emerging reproductive technologies such as in vitro gametogenesis and artificial wombs. IVG involves the creation of sperm or egg cells (gametes) from other cell types, most commonly pluripotent stem cells. Although not yet approved for human use, researchers in Japan have successfully transformed skin cells from mice into viable egg cells using induced pluripotent stem cell techniques.¹⁷ This breakthrough opens the door to reproduction without the need for natural human gametes. Additionally,

¹⁷ Michaeleen Doucleff, “Japanese Scientists Race to Create Human Eggs and Sperm in the Lab,” *NPR*, September 28, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/09/28/1200105467/japanese-scientists-race-to-create-human-eggs-and-sperm-in-the-lab>. For more information on in vitro gametogenesis (IVG), see Emma Waters, “Designer Embryos and Kids Born from the DNA of Throuple Parents? Understanding the Depraved New World of EPs and IVG,” *Christ Over All*, February 14, 2024, <https://christoverall.com/article/concise/designer-embryos-and-kids-born-from-the-dna-of-throuple-parents-understanding-the-depraved-new-world-of-eps-and-ivg/>.



ectogenesis, the gestation of an embryo in an artificial environment, could potentially bypass the need for a biological mother entirely. Although still experimental, these technologies are attracting significant financial support from Silicon Valley investors.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BEING PRO-FAMILY AND MERELY PRONATALIST

A biblical ethic affirms and celebrates both families and children. The psalmist declares in Psalm 127:3–5, “Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his en-

emies in the gate.”

From a Christian perspective, the impulse to welcome more children into the world is noble and commendable. Every child — born and unborn — is made in the image of God and, therefore, possesses inherent dignity and worth.

However, unlike the technocratic pronatalism promoted by some in Silicon Valley, children must never be regarded merely as a means to an end, even if those ends are commendable goals like national security or preserving entitlement programs like Social Security. Reproductive technologies that sever procreation from its God-ordained context within the covenant of marriage are incompatible with a Christian understanding of the family.

Pronatalists are right to be concerned about declining birthrates, but the answer is not simply “more babies for the sake of more babies.” In a 2024 article, Emma Waters makes an important distinction between a truly *pro-family* approach and a *merely pronatalist* one.¹⁸ The pro-family approach recognizes marriage as the best foundation for childrearing, while the pronatalist approach often focuses on increasing fertility without considering the essential family and moral context that helps children thrive. For Christians, the pro-family model is the biblical standard and must take precedence over any utilitarian approach that reduces children to economic assets or demographic tools.

¹⁸ Emma Waters, “Pro-Natalism Is Not Enough,” The Heritage Foundation, August 28, 2024, <https://www.heritage.org/marriage-and-family/commentary/pro-natalism-not-enough>.

THE EFFECTS OF THE MARRIAGE RECESSION CANNOT BE IGNORED

Waters also notes that the ongoing “marriage recession” marked by rising divorce rates, cohabitation, single parenthood, and hookup culture predates and contributes to the fertility crisis in the United States.¹⁹ Delayed or foregone marriage is a key factor in declining birthrates among millennials and Gen Z. A 2023 study found that although eighty-three percent of millennials and Gen Z express a desire to marry, seventy-three percent say it is too expensive, and eighty-five percent believe marriage is not necessary for a fulfilling or committed relationship.²⁰ As of 2023, the average age for first marriages is 30.2 years for men and 28.4 years for women. By contrast, in 1950, the average ages were 22.8 and 20.3, respectively.²¹ At that time, the birth rate was around three children per woman, compared to just 1.62 today — well below replacement level.²² The correlation between delayed marriage and declining fertility is clear, suggesting that rebuilding a culture that values and supports marriage is essential to reversing America’s falling birthrate.

Research consistently shows that children thrive when raised by their biological parents in a stable, two-parent home.

In particular, fatherlessness is strongly associated with increased risks of poverty, academic failure, violence, substance abuse, and incarceration. By contrast, children raised in intact, married families tend to experience better educational outcomes, fewer behavior problems, greater emotional well-being, and lower rates of poverty.²³ One report found that eighty-five percent of youths in prison come from fatherless rooms.²⁴ A separate study on school shootings revealed that only eighteen percent of shooters were raised by both biological parents; eighty-two percent came from unstable or broken homes.²⁵ In short, social science research consistently affirms that children are best equipped for a healthy adulthood when raised in a home with both a mother and father.

CONCLUSION

Increasing the birth rate could help address some long-term economic and social challenges, like sustaining Social Security or mitigating eldercare shortages. However, this must not become the primary motivation for encouraging child-birth. Christians should instead champion children and families as intrinsic goods rooted in God’s design. Although recent pronatalist rhetoric and policy

¹⁹ Waters, “Pro-Natalism Is Not Enough.”

²⁰ Thriving Center of Psychology, “I Do Not: Gen Z, Millennials Shifting Expectations About Marriage in 2023,” blog, June 23, 2023, <https://thrivingcenterofpsych.com/blog/millennials-gen-z-marriage-expectations-statistics/>.

²¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “Living Arrangements of Adults 18 and Older: 1967 to Present,” Figure MS-2, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/time-series/demo/families-and-households/ms-2.pdf>.

²² U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Table 1-1. Live Births, Birth Rates, and Fertility Rates, by Race: United States, 1909-2002,” archived January 17, 2025, accessed March 20, 2025, https://archive.cdc.gov/#/details?url=https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/statab/natfinal2002.annvol1_01.pdf.

²³ For a more lengthy study on the topic, see Patrick F. Fagan, *Marriage: The Safest Place for Women and Children*, The Heritage Foundation, April 9, 2009, <https://www.heritage.org/welfare/report/marriage-the-safest-place-women-and-children>.

²⁴ This statistic is cited by No Longer Fatherless, “Statistics,” accessed March 21, 2025, <https://www.nolongerfatherless.org/statistics>.

²⁵ Peter Langman, “School Shooters: The Myth of the Stable Home,” May 24, 2016, https://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/shooters_myth_stable_home_1.15.pdf.

proposals reflect a growing awareness of the demographic crisis, Christians must not settle for being merely pronatalist. A biblical worldview affirms the importance of family formation, childbearing, and parenting within the covenant of marriage between a husband and wife who are committed to raising their children in the nurture and instruction of the Lord. ✕

David Closson is the Director of the Center for Biblical Worldview at Family Research Council and author of Life After Roe: Equipping Christians in the Fight for Life Today.



Confronting the Empathy of Surrogacy



Last month I had the privilege of joining Jordan Peterson on his podcast.¹ As an advisory board member for his new organization, the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship, I assumed we'd cover general social fabric principles — one major plank of ARC's mission.

But once preliminaries were out of the way, Peterson introduced what is likely our biggest disagreement — surrogacy. Specifically, Jordan brought up his friend Dave Rubin, who, along with his husband David Janet, created two children through surrogacy. We would go on to discuss reproductive technologies and same-sex parenting for forty minutes.

Since I'm a great admirer of Jordan Peterson (JBP) and since this is one of the largest platforms I've appeared on, I of course read all 2000 YouTube comments. Surprisingly, more agreed with me than him.

ENTICING US AWAY

Some expressed bewilderment at the kinda-kid-glove treatment Peterson extended to Reuben in their hour-long conversation shortly after Ruben's "pregnancy" announcement.² Dozens noted that they are huge JBP fans and usually in 100% agreement with Peterson, but not on this. Several wondered if Peterson "had a blind spot" on the issue because of his friendship with Ruben.

¹ Jordan B. Peterson, "Gay Marriage, Surrogacy, Divorce & Hookup Culture | Katy Faust | EP 527" (March 6, 2025), YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4Q0WXBH0HM&t=632s>

² Jordan B. Peterson, "Gay Parenting: Promise and Pitfalls | Dave Rubin | EP 266" (June 29, 2022), YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75uuWtRrnJI>.

Ordinarily crystal clear on human truths such as the distinct but complementary nature of male and female, the importance of marriage, motherhood, and fatherhood, we might think it bizarre that Peterson's judgment was somewhat cloudy on the question of same-sex parenting. But the correct response is not to scoff at his confusion, but to recognize that every one of us is susceptible to similar compromise when someone we love is complicit in a behavior that goes against the clear biblical, or biological, good. God himself recognizes and warns against the degenerative pull those in our social circle can exert upon us (Deut 13:6–11). When someone we love, family or friend, is veering off the straight and narrow, it's not uncommon for them to entice us into the ditch along with them. And today, that often happens under the banner of empathy and compassion.

NO ROOM FOR CONFUSION ABOUT SURROGACY

Few Christians are confused about same-sex parenting. They understand it not only goes against God's design for the family, but against nature as well. Unfortunately, many Christians *are* confused about surrogacy. Outside of Catholicism, hardly any denominations³ have clear teaching on IVE,⁴ let alone the much rarer practice of surrogacy. When did you last hear your pastor address the issue of surrogacy from the pulpit? Odds are... never. *Sola Scriptura* all the way for me, but at times like this, an evangelical *Humanae Vitae* sounds awfully nice.



³ Emma Waters, "Protestant Denominations Need Stronger Leadership on Assisted Reproductive Technology" *American Reformer*, last modified January 22, 2024, <https://americanreformer.org/2024/01/protestant-denominations-need-stronger-leadership-on-assisted-reproductive-technology/>.

⁴ Katie Breckenridge, "IVF Harms to Children." *Them before Us*, last modified July 15, 2022, <https://thembeforeus.com/ivf-harms-to-children/>.

“children always pay the price.”

Because there’s no “thou shall not hire an economically vulnerable woman to gestate your custom ordered baby” Bible verse, and absent official ecclesiastical guidance on reproductive technologies, many Christians evaluate surrogacy not through a biblical lens, but through an empathy lens.

They see their infertile friends desperate for a child. They long for those homes to be filled with little feet. They know “children are a blessing from the Lord,” and if outsourcing pregnancy means their infertile sister will receive that “blessing,” what could be wrong with surrogacy?

Well, unfortunately, a whole awful lot.

For those unbaptized in the world of #Big-Fertility, you need to know that surrogacy is increasingly promoted as a method for single,⁵ double⁶ or triple⁷ men to acquire

children. It is a go-to for celebrities who want both a baby and a bikini bod.⁸ It’s an appealing option for child predators.⁹ It’s how grandpa-aged men take possession of unrelated infants.¹⁰ It’s a pathway for Chinese nationals to gain US citizenship.¹¹ It’s how a “baby factory” dad mass-produced a dozen-plus children¹² and how a twenty-six year old woman became a mother of twenty-two.¹³

If we allow sympathy for our post-cancer friend who lost her uterus to cloud our judgment on the never-before-seen practice of intentional mother-baby separation, we throw the door open to utter dystopia. And children always pay the price.

The good news is, there are unambiguous biblical principles that must shape our approach to all reproductive technologies, and surrogacy specifically. Those meta

⁵ Edward Segarra, “Andy Cohen Reveals Daughter’s Birth via Gestational Surrogacy Was ‘One of the First’ in NY,” *USA TODAY*, last modified June 4, 2023, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/celebrities/2023/06/04/andy-cohen-daughter-lucy-born-gestational-surrogacy-new-york/70286590007/#>.

⁶ Katy Faust, X (Formerly Twitter), posted March 1, 2022, https://x.com/advo_katy/status/150415148749439361?s=46&t=cKLTc4iwUxQ2wF82Hup9nw.

⁷ Kai Xiang Teo, “We’re a Gay Throuple Who’ve Spent Over \$1700,000 on Surrogacy and Adoption,” *Business Insider*, last modified October 23, 2023, <https://www.businessinsider.com/gay-throuple-spending-on-surrogacy-adoption-2023-9>.

⁸ Johnni Macke, “Khloe Kardashian Shares Cryptic Message amid Surrogacy News,” *Us Weekly*, last modified July 21, 2022, <https://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/khloe-kardashian-shares-cryptic-message-amid-surrogacy-news/>.

⁹ Katy Faust, “Meet 5 Accused Pedophiles Who Bought Kids through Surrogacy,” *The Federalist*, last modified January 22, 2024, <https://thefederalist.com/2024/01/22/meet-5-accused-pedophiles-who-bought-kids-through-surrogacy/>.

¹⁰ SurrogacyConcern, X (Formerly Twitter), posted on November 2, 2025, <https://x.com/surrogconcern/status/1728530554449166484?s=46&t=cKLTc4iwUxQ2wF82Hup9nw>.

¹¹ Emma Waters, “U.S. Surrogacy Industry Lures Alarming Number of Chinese Nationals,” *The Federalist*, last modified December 14, 2023, <https://thefederalist.com/2023/12/14/americas-rent-a-womb-industry-lures-an-alarming-number-of-chinese-nationals/>.

¹² British Broadcasting Association, “Mitsutoki Shigeta: ‘Baby Factory’ Dad Wins Paternity Rights,” last modified November 20, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43123658>.

¹³ Elmira Tanatarova, “I Have 22 Children at the Age of 26 and Most of Them Were Born in the Space of a Year Thanks To Surrogacy – I Won’t Stop Until I Have More than 100,” *Daily Mail*, last modified October 25, 2023, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-12666255/1-22-children-age-26-born-space-year-thanks-surrogacy-wont-stop-100.html>.

truths must trump whatever empathy we feel for our infertile friend. Christianity's concern is not validating adults — even if some of their desires are God-given. Christians have a distinct responsibility to children.¹⁴ Thus, when considering reproductive technologies in general, and surrogacy specifically, it is children's rights and needs that should rank highest.

SURROGACY ALWAYS HARMS CHILDREN

While there are a variety of adult interests — intended parents, surrogate mother, sperm/egg, sellers, lawyers, fertility doctors — from the child's perspective, surrogacy requires loss. Surrogacy splices what should be one woman — mother — into three purchasable and optional women.¹⁵

1. Genetic mother: the egg “donor” who grants children their biological identity.
2. Birth mother: with whom the baby develops their first, critical bond.
3. Social mother: who provides daily female care which maximizes child development and satisfies the child's longing for maternal love.

For children, none of these three moth-

ers are optional. If children never know their genetic mother they often experience identity struggles.¹⁶ If they lose their birth mother,¹⁷ they experience a “primal wound,”¹⁸ making bonding, trust, and attachment more challenging. If they are deprived of a social mother their development¹⁹ is affected and they may experience “mother hunger.”²⁰

No matter what form it takes — traditional or gestational, altruistic or commercial, commissioned by gay or straight adults — surrogacy insists children lose one or all of these mothers. But it's not the tragic loss of a fallen world which can and should be redeemed through adoption.²¹ It is an intentional child loss because an adult *wants it that way*. And that violates several biblical mandates.

CHILD PROTECTION

God insists his people take child protection seriously. It's one basis on which Job pleaded his innocence: “I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist them” (Job 29:12). Child sacrifice was listed among the reasons God condemned Israel to Babylonian exile (Ezek 16:21). Even if an unborn child is harmed when his mother is *accidentally* struck, God

¹⁴ Katy Faust, “Children and the Christian Revolution.” *WORLD*, last modified October 20, 2023, <https://wng.org/opinions/children-and-the-christian-revolution-1697747323>.

¹⁵ Katy Faust, “The Conservative, Pro-Life Case against Surrogacy,” *The Federalist*, last modified December 4, 2023, <https://thefederalist.com/2023/12/04/the-conservative-pro-life-case-against-surrogacy/>.

¹⁶ Them Before Us, “Donor Conception,” accessed March 26, 2025, <https://thembeforeus.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Donor-Conception-Handout.pdf>.

¹⁷ Olivia Maurel, “I Was Born via Surrogate... But from Day One There Was No Bond with My Mother and My Childhood Was...” *Daily Mail*, last modified January 11, 2024, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-12948247/surrogate-mother-childhood-unhappy-banned.html>.

¹⁸ Nancy Newton Verrier, *The Primal Wound Understanding the Adopted Child*. (Baltimore, MD: Gateway Press, 1993).

¹⁹ Them Before Us, “Gender Matters,” accessed March 26, 2025, <https://thembeforeus.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/2.-Biology-Matters-Handout-1.pdf>.

²⁰ Samantha Wiessing, “I Was Raised by 2 Gay Men. I Still Think Children Deserve to Be Adopted into a Home with a Mother and a Father,” *The Tennessean*, last modified January 23, 2020, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/2020/01/23/children-deserve-adopted-into-home-mother-and-father/4547829002/>.

²¹ Katy Faust, “Third Party Reproduction vs. Adoption- There's a Big Difference,” *Them before Us*, last modified April 17, 2017, <https://thembeforeus.com/third-party-reproduction-vs-adoption-theres-a-big-difference/>.

insists on proportionate punishment for the offender — an eye for an eye, a life for a life (Exod 21:22–25). Chief among our concerns for children must be their safety and overall wellbeing. Surrogacy threatens both.

CARE FOR THE ORPHAN

You are no doubt aware that God’s definition of “pure and undefiled religion” includes “caring for orphans in their distress” (James 1:29). Adoption is one of the greatest ways we *care* for orphans.²² As the former Assistant Director of the largest Chinese adoption agency in the world, I was charged with upholding state, national, and international standards to ensure that adults were properly vetted and screened prior to child placement. We also ensured that money never flowed from intended parents to birth parents, otherwise it was no longer a valid adoption but child trafficking. In adoption, adults shoulder the load in an attempt to relieve children of the burden of parental loss. Adoption is one way we manifest our *undefiled religion*.²³

Surrogacy, on the other hand, is a means of *manufacturing* orphans, usually for profit. The process often involves legally

orphaning children via a “pre-birth order” that preemptively strips children of a relationship with genetic, and/or birth parents.²⁴ There are no adoption-like requirements for intended parents to undergo screenings, vetting, or background checks, a reality that has contributed to multiple stories of children acquired by sexual predators.²⁵ The #BigFertility industry is also predicated on direct payments to genetic/birth parents, making it categorically child trafficking.²⁶ Surrogacy is a manifestation of *defiled religion*.

DEFEND THE FATHERLESS (AND MOTHERLESS)

The Old Testament includes dozens of commands to defend and protect the fatherless. That’s because, in both BC and AD, children raised outside the protective umbrella of their parents’ lifelong marriage experience drastically diminished physical,²⁷ mental,²⁸ academic,²⁹ and relational health,³⁰ exploitation,³¹ and poverty.³² The fatherless, then and now, stand out as a demographic deserving of distinct protection because they are distinctly vulnerable.

²² What Would You Say, “Surrogacy Is Just Like Adoption,” *Colson Center*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NS107WwsJ24>.

²³ Katy Faust, “You Can’t Fix Tough Adoptions with ‘Re-Homing,’ Only Faithfulness,” *The Federalist*, last modified June 3, 2020, <https://thefederalist.com/2020/06/03/you-cant-fix-tough-adoptions-with-re-homing-only-faithfulness/>.

²⁴ Surrogate.com, “Establishing Parentage in Surrogacy,” accessed March 26, 2025, <https://surrogate.com/intended-parents/surrogacy-laws-and-legal-information/establishing-parentage-in-surrogacy/>.

²⁵ Katy Faust, “Meet 5 Accused Pedophiles Who Bought Kids through Surrogacy,” *The Federalist*, last modified January 22, 2024, <https://thefederalist.com/2024/01/22/meet-5-accused-pedophiles-who-bought-kids-through-surrogacy/>.

²⁶ Katy Faust, “The Conservative, Pro-Life Case against Surrogacy,” *The Federalist*, last modified December 4, 2023, <https://thefederalist.com/2023/12/04/the-conservative-pro-life-case-against-surrogacy/>.

²⁷ Colter Mitchell, et al., “Father Loss and Child Telomere Length,” *Pediatrics* 140, no. 2 (August 2017): e20163245. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2016-3245>.

²⁸ Aniruddh Prakash Behere, et al., “Effects of Family Structure on Mental Health of Children: A Preliminary Study,” *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine* 39, no. 4 (July 2017): 457–63, <https://doi.org/10.4103/0253-7176.211767>.

²⁹ Gary D Sandefur, et al., “The Effects of Parental Marital Status during Adolescence on High School Graduation,” *Social Forces* 71, no. 1 (September 1992): 103, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2579968>.

³⁰ Paul R. Amato, et al., “The Transmission of Marital Instability across Generations: Relationship Skills or Commitment to Marriage?” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63, no. 4 (March 2004): 1038–51, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2001.01038.x>.

³¹ Darcy Olsen, “Foster Care Children Are Easy Prey for Predators: They Disappear without a Real Search,” *USA TODAY*, last modified February 24, 2022, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/columnist/2022/02/24/children-disappear-foster-care-trafficking/6829115001/>.

³² Angela Rachidi, “Dynamics of Families after a Nonmarital Birth,” *American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research*, (January 2024): 1–22, <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Dynamics-of-Families-After-a-Nonmarital-Birth.pdf?x91208>.



A follower once asked me, “Why didn’t God mandate protection of the motherless?” The answer is that in Old Testament days they were virtually nonexistent. First, unlike men who can bail post-conception, a woman is required to be connected to the child for the first nine months. Biological systems not present in the father/child relationship chemically knit together mother and baby, making her post-birth abandonment unlikely. Further, if the mother died during or soon after childbirth, the baby would often die as well.

Never before has humanity faced the phenomenon of “the motherless.” Only surrogacy enables what is utterly foreign to the human race — a motherless baby. Some

surrogacy apologists point to the dearth of data on children who grew up from birth without a mother as evidence that there must be “no harm.” The absence of data is actually the greatest alarm bell — we haven’t measured it because it runs counter to human realities of procreation, gestation, and early childhood development. Since the data on the harms of fatherlessness are well known,³³ we can assume that the stats on motherless children, with whom they have a greater bond in the first three years, will be even more devastating.³⁴

Whenever you read of God’s admonishment to protect “the fatherless,” we must assume the mandate applies to “the motherless” as well. Far from *protecting*

³³ The Fatherless Generation, “Statistics,” last modified, April 28, 2010, <https://thefatherlessgeneration.wordpress.com/statistics/>.

³⁴ Erica Komisar, *Being There: Why Prioritizing Motherhood in the First Three Years Matters* (New York: Tarcherperigee, 2017).

the motherless, surrogacy *manufactures* the motherless.

SACRIFICE FOR THE WEAK

A biblical meta-principle that runs throughout Scripture is that the strong are to sacrifice for the weak, not vice versa. Here are a few verses that speak to that biblical truth.

- We are to “rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (Ps 82:1).
- God expects kings to take up the cause of the poor and needy, and thereby fully know the Lord (Jer 22:16).
- We are to open our mouths for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute (Prov 31:8–9).
- Romans 15 explicitly states, “we who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak.”
- God warns of cruel and unusual punishment for adults who would cause “little ones” to stumble (Matt 18:6).
- After his archetypal Good Samaritan parable on expending oneself on behalf of the helpless, Jesus commands us to “go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

God demonstrated his “sacrifice for the weak” principle on a cosmic scale when Christ, the strongest of all, died for the ungodly “while we were still powerless” (Rom 5:6). Surrogacy violates this meta-principle because it always requires the weak (children) to sacrifice for the strong (adults).

Just as Jordan Peterson can allow human truths to be blurred through the lens of friendship, we too are susceptible to blurring biblical truths through the lens of empathy for adults.

Brothers and sisters, this ought not be so. Your primary allegiance is to God’s truth, which always redounds to the benefit of children. God’s truth requires all of us — single, married, gay, straight, fertile, and infertile — to sacrifice our own desires so the least of these are protected. ✕

Katy Faust is the founder and president of Them Before Us, a global movement that defends children’s rights to their mother and father. She publishes and testifies widely on why marriage and family are matters of justice for children and is a regular contributor at WORLD Magazine and The Federalist.

J. ALAN BRANCH



Surrogate Motherhood:

A Christian Ethical Analysis



“the billboard advertising surrogacy and the strip clubs had something in common: Both were exploiting the bodies of young women, promising them profit for selling themselves”

Moral questions surrounding the issue of surrogacy were brought directly to my attention during an Uber ride in Dallas, Texas in 2019.¹ Having attended a conference in the Dallas metroplex, I secured an Uber driver to take me back to the airport. As I sat in the back of a lovely Chevy Tahoe, the young woman driver began to open up about her life. Having completed college, she was supplementing her income by taking Uber fares, something she did to pay off her college debt. She then casually mentioned that she was considering becoming a surrogate to pay off her student loans. We had an engaging conversation in which I gently suggested some reasons why I had moral concerns about surrogacy, and I gathered she had not heard any of these counterarguments. I want to stress that our conversation was open and pleasant and not acrimonious, but the image of this bright young woman who projected herself very well and yet was considering surrogacy as a way of paying off student loans has remained with me.

Surrogacy was again pressed upon my mind in January, 2024. My wife and I vacationed on a cruise that docked at the

Port of Galveston Island. As my wife Lisa and I were riding the shuttle bus from Galveston Island to the airport in Houston, we passed a billboard which promised women \$60,000 for being a surrogate mother. As we exited the interstate and approached the airport we passed two strip clubs which advertised lewd entertainment provided by young women. In my mind, I felt that the billboard advertising surrogacy and the strip clubs had something in common: Both were exploiting the bodies of young women, promising them profit for selling themselves.

The modern practice of surrogate motherhood has brought with it a multitude of new moral and ethical questions. Surrogacy can be defined as the practice whereby one woman carries and delivers a child for another woman, another man, or another couple with or without payment and with the intention that the child should be handed over at birth.² Surrogacy is connected with the broader field of artificial reproductive technologies in that various procedures such as in vitro fertilization or artificial insemination make surrogacy possible since these are the methods used

¹ This essay was originally presented as a paper at the Evangelical Theological Society, November 2024, and has been lightly edited for publication.

² Department of Health & Social Security, *Report of the Committee of Inquiry Into Human Fertilization and Embryology*, Dame Mary Warnock, DBE, Chairman (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1984, reprinted 1988), 42. I modified the definition to include diverse sexual relationships now in vogue and consideration of pay.

to impregnate the surrogate.

What are we as Christians to make of surrogacy? Is the practice similar to the exploitation of women in various forms of sex clubs? Is it morally permissible to serve as surrogate in order for a woman to extricate herself from financial exigency? This essay argues surrogate motherhood conflicts with several principles of Christian ethics and the practice presents more problems than it solves. Biblical warnings against adultery, slavery, and exploitation of vulnerable people raise serious concerns about the morality of surrogacy. Furthermore, the sanctity of life principle intersects with the unstated assumption that the goal of a surrogate pregnancy is a child free from noticeable defects. To argue these points, this essay will begin by defining the various forms of surrogacy, then summarize various arguments in favor of surrogacy, and then analyze surrogacy from a Christian sanctity-of-life perspective.

I. Surrogacy: A Brief Introduction

A surrogate mother or “gestational carrier” is a woman who agrees to carry a child through pregnancy and deliver it on behalf of another person or couple.³ The parents who contract the surrogate are variously called the “intended parents” or the “commissioning mother and father” or “commissioning parents.” If the intended parents provided both the sperm and the egg, they are also called the biological parents. The woman who actually carries the baby is called either the surrogate or the gestation-

al carrier. Surrogacy can be divided into four categories, which often overlap: genetic surrogacy, gestational surrogacy, commercial surrogacy, and altruistic surrogacy.

Genetic Surrogacy

In *Genetic Surrogacy*, the surrogate is impregnated via artificial insemination with the sperm from a male partner in a couple hoping to have a child (the intended parents or contracting parents); the contracting parents may be married or unmarried, heterosexual or homosexual, but the two people are in some sort of permanent relationship. The surrogate, a third party, is artificially inseminated with the male partner’s/husband’s semen; the surrogate provides both an ovum and uterus for the couple to use. This practice is called *genetic surrogacy* because the surrogate herself is genetically related to the child. The surrogate conceives, carries, and gives birth to the child and surrenders her rights to the child to the contracting couple.⁴ According to the American Society of Reproductive Medicine, genetic surrogacy is “rarely offered by most programs, and is more ethically and legally complex.”⁵

Gestational Surrogacy

In gestational surrogacy, the surrogate herself is not genetically related to the child, but only provides a womb; the surrogate has no genetic relationship to the child because both gametes are provided by the intended parents. An embryo is created via IVF and implanted into the surrogate who

³ Megan Best, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made: Ethics and the Beginning of Human Life* (Kingsford, NSW, Australia: Matthias Media, 2012), 366.

⁴ This summary comes from Scott Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 149.

⁵ Ethics Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, “Consideration of the Gestational Carrier: An Ethics Committee Opinion,” *Fertility and Sterility* 110.6 (November 2018): 1017.

carries the baby to term. At birth, the baby is handed over to genetic parents. This is the most common type of surrogacy.

In another version of gestational surrogacy, the intended parents may acquire sperm from a sperm donor as well as eggs from an egg donor, and then use these gametes to create embryos in vitro. These embryos are subsequently placed in a contracted surrogate. In this case, the child in question has no genetic relationship to either the surrogate or the intended parents.

Commercial or Contractual Surrogacy

Commercial or contractual surrogacy occurs when the intended parent or parents enters into a financial agreement in which the surrogate agrees to carry the baby to term for a fee. Contractual surrogacy is sometimes called *third party* surrogacy, though to be clear all surrogacy arrangements entail a third party. Usually, contractual surrogacy arrangements are between previously unknown individuals and arranged by agencies or brokers. It's strictly business.

Altruistic Surrogacy

In altruistic surrogacy, the surrogate mother agrees to carry the child for the intended parents without any financial compensation, though the intended parents usually pay for medical expenses associated with the pregnancy. It's called altruistic because the surrogate is not carrying the child based on a profit motive but does so on behalf of a friend or fami-

ly member. Nonetheless, even though the surrogate does not charge a fee, the child is given to the intended parents at birth.

The binary distinction between commercial and altruistic surrogacy is difficult to maintain since some sort of financial arrangement is almost always in view.⁶ Kirsty Horsey explains the difficulties in separating commercial from altruistic surrogacy and says, "Variations in the types of payment allowed, and to whom, as well as service models or activities undertaken by third parties in support of surroga-

⁶ For example, see Alan Brown, "Surrogacy Law Reform In the UK: The Ambiguous Position of Payments to the Surrogate," *Child and Family Law Quarterly* 33.2 (2021): 95–114.

cy arrangements, in conjunction with the type of contractual framework permitted, all affect whether an arrangement could be deemed ‘altruistic’ or ‘commercial’⁷ Granting that the categories can overlap, I will basically follow Horsey and use commercial surrogacy to mean a framework in which profit-making entities such as surrogacy agencies or brokers are involved while noting that individual women can pursue surrogacy without the aid of a broker.⁸ Altruistic surrogacies do not involve such open, profit-based motives.

The four categories of genetic, gestational, contractual, and altruistic surrogacy are helpful but hardly describe the infinite number of arrangements that are possible with surrogacy. When considered in the light of legalized homosexual marriage in western countries, possible combinations include the following:

The surrogate is artificially inseminated with the sperm of a husband and the subsequent child is then raised by the husband and his wife.



⁷ Kirsty Horsey, “The Future of Surrogacy: A Review of Current Global Trends and National Landscapes,” *Reproductive Bio-Medicine Online* 48.5 (May 2024): 2.

⁸ Horsey, “The Future of Surrogacy,” 3.

The surrogate is artificially inseminated with the sperm from a male in a heterosexual couple who are not married. The subsequent child is then raised by the unmarried couple.

The surrogate is artificially inseminated with sperm from one male from a homosexual marriage. The subsequent child is then raised by the two married men but the child is genetically related to only one of them.

The surrogate is artificially inseminated with sperm from one male in a homosexual relationship, but the two men are not married. The subsequent child is then raised by two single men but the child is genetically related to only one of them.

The surrogate carries a child in which she is contracted by two women in a homosexual marriage. The egg of one of the partners is joined with sperm from a sperm donor in vitro to create an embryo placed in the surrogate. The two women then raise a child genetically related to only one of them.

The surrogate carries a child in which she is contracted by two women in a

homosexual relationship but the women are not legally married. The egg of one of the partners is joined with sperm from a sperm donor in vitro to create an embryo placed in the surrogate. The two women then raise a child genetically related to only one of them.

The surrogate carries a child in which the sperm and egg from a husband and wife are joined in vitro to create an embryo placed in the surrogate. The contracting married couple then raise the child.

The surrogate carries a child in which the egg of a wife is joined with the sperm from a sperm donor in vitro to create an embryo placed in the surrogate. The contracting married couple then raise the child genetically related to only one of them.

The surrogate carries a child in which the egg of an egg donor is joined with the sperm of a husband in vitro to create an embryo placed in the surrogate. The contracting married couple then raise the child genetically related to only one of them.

The surrogate carries a child created



via joining an egg from an egg donor and sperm from a sperm donor in vitro to create an embryo placed in the surrogate. The contracting married couple then raise the child genetically related to neither the husband nor the wife.

The surrogate carries a child created via joining an egg from an egg donor and sperm from a sperm donor in vitro to create an embryo placed in surrogate. But in this case, the contracting couple are two homosexual men or two homosexual women who then raise the child genetically related to neither member of the couple.

The sperm from an unmarried male is artificially inseminated into the surrogate and the subsequent child is then raised by the male as a single parent.

A single male uses a sperm donor and an egg donor to create an embryo via in vitro which is placed in the surrogate. The subsequent child is then raised by the contracting male though he is not genetically related to the child.

The egg from a single woman is joined with the sperm from a sperm donor in vitro to create an embryo

which is then placed in the surrogate. The child is then raised by the contracting woman as a single mother.

A single female uses a sperm donor and an egg donor to create an embryo via in vitro which is placed in the surrogate. The subsequent child is then raised by the contracting female though she is not genetically related to the child.

Should human cloning become viable, any number of people, male or female, married or single, homosexual or heterosexual could have a clone created via somatic cell nuclear transfer and the subsequent embryo placed in a surrogate.

People affiliated in group relationships such as "throuples" could use in vitro fertilization to create embryos related to some or none of the people within the circle of sexual partners. The embryo could be placed in a surrogate and the subsequent child would be raised by the group.

In a scenario similar to the previous, the surrogate carries a child in which she is artificially inseminated with the sperm of one member of the group of sexual partners and the subsequent child is raised by the group.

The complexity and number of these scenarios could be multiplied several times by adding the variables of whether or not the surrogate receives financial compensation in each case.

How many surrogates?

Exact counting of surrogate arrangements



transacted each year in the US is difficult to know. One review of data reported that between 1999 and 2013, there were 30,927 gestational surrogate pregnancies. Not all of these pregnancies came to full term as there were only 13,380 deliveries; 8,581 led to birth of one child, 4,566 were twin pregnancies, and 233 were triplet pregnancies, resulting in 13,380 deliveries, with a total of 18,400 infants born.⁹ In 2022, Global Market Insights predicted the global surrogacy market will increase to \$129 billion by 2032, with the largest growth expected to be among gestational carriers.¹⁰

Surrogacy Costs

The costs for surrogacy have steadily increased. According to *U.S. News and World Report*, gestational surrogacy costs around \$100,000 to \$150,000 in 2020.¹¹ Of that, surrogates took home an average \$30,000 to \$35,000, with a bonus if they carry multiple pregnancies. The remainder of the money goes to the middlemen involved in the transaction, covering agency fees, legal fees, counseling services, and health insurance. In 2017, if a surrogate carried the child nine months, the standard surrogacy fee worked out to around \$5 per hour for the duration of the pregnancy.¹² But by 2024, the average nationwide base pay for first-time surrogates has risen to between \$45,000 and \$55,000, with fees rising to be-

tween \$60,000 to \$70,000 for second-time surrogates.¹³

Health of Children Conceived Via Surrogacy

Neonates born from commissioned embryos and carried by gestational surrogates have increased adverse perinatal outcomes, including preterm birth, low birth weight, hypertension, maternal gestational diabetes, and placenta previa, compared with singletons conceived spontaneously and carried by the same woman.¹⁴

Legal Status of Surrogacy

The legal status of surrogacy varies widely around the world. In the United States, surrogacy laws vary state by state. California is considered the most surrogacy-friendly state because the process is allowed for everyone, whether married, unmarried, LGBTQ, or single parent.

In Europe, surrogacy laws trend much more conservative than in the US. In Great Britain, Ireland, Denmark, and Belgium, commercial surrogacy is illegal — you cannot pay someone to be a surrogate. But if a woman volunteers to be a surrogate (altruistic surrogacy), that is legal. Countries such as France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Bulgaria prohibit all forms of surrogacy.

⁹ Kiran M. Perkins, Sheree L. Boulet, Denise J. Jamieson, and Dimitry M. Kissin, "Trends and Outcomes of Gestational Surrogacy in the United States," *Fertility and Sterility* 106.2 (August 2016): 437.

¹⁰ Global Market Insights, "Surrogacy Market," November 2022, <https://www.gminsights.com/industry-analysis/surrogacy-market>.

¹¹ Susannah Snider, "The Cost of Using a Surrogate – And How To Pay For It," *U.S. News and World Report*, November 24, 2020, <https://money.usnews.com/money/personal-finance/family-finance/articles/how-much-surrogacy-costs-and-how-to-pay-for-it>.

¹² Moira Weigel, "Made in America," *New Republic* 248.11 (November 2017): 34.

¹³ Megan Cerullo, "How Much Do Surrogates Make? People Describe the Real-Life Dollars and Cents of Surrogacy," *CBS News*, January 12, 2024, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-much-do-surrogate-mothers-make-cost/>.

¹⁴ Irene Woo, Rita Hindoyan, Melanie Landay, Jacqueline Ho, Sue Ann Ingles, Lynda K. McGinnis, Richard J. Paulson, Karine Chung, "Perinatal outcomes after natural conception versus in vitro fertilization (IVF) in gestational surrogates: a model to evaluate IVF treatment versus maternal effects," *Fertility and Sterility* 108.6 (December 1, 2017): 993–998.

Poor women from India were so exploited in surrogacy arrangements that in 2021 the nation enacted the Surrogacy Regulation Act which prohibits commercial surrogacy. Furthermore, the act allows only married couples or women who have ever been married (widowed or divorced) to seek a surrogate. Only altruistic surrogacy is now allowed in India.

II. ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF SURROGACY

What arguments are leveraged in favor of surrogacy? Given that surrogacy is a global phenomenon, what moral reasoning is used to support the practice?

Altruism: Surrogates help people who cannot have babies.

Surrogacy is presented as a benevolent way to help others who cannot have a baby. Altruistic surrogacy in particular is seen as a sacrificial way to help someone else. One surrogacy advocate cited Acts 20:35 in favor of the practice: “It is more blessed to give than receive.”¹⁵ The assumption in such reasoning is that the surrogate is giving the contracting parents something they desperately want — an infant. The argument that surrogacy helps infertile couples is the most common reason suggested for the moral legitimacy of surrogacy.

In India, some believe a surrogate mother may accrue good karma by helping infer-

tile couples.¹⁶ This view is likely felt more strongly if the surrogate herself believes her birth in an underprivileged class or financial status is the result of bad karma in previous life. Surrogacy is seen as a way to bring other people happiness and to accrue merit.

By helping infertile couples have children, surrogacy is said to help build stronger families. Unlike adoption, surrogacy enables an infertile couple to have a child genetically related to them; she will have mom’s nose or dad’s smile. Surrogacy helps complete a family, and one surrogacy agency adds, “The disappointment and stigma of infertility can be harsh, which is why surrogacy gives parents a chance to overcome these issues and successfully have biological children.”¹⁷ In some cases, the problem goes beyond mere infertility to imminent danger to a woman’s health if she becomes pregnant.

For some women, pregnancy is not medically advisable, thus using a surrogate is much safer.

Surrogacy allows a woman for whom pregnancy is not medically advisable to have a child genetically related to herself. In some cases, a mother’s life may be in danger if she becomes pregnant, so it is considered statistically much safer to engage a surrogate who has a healthy body. Every pregnancy carries risks with it, but for some women certain physical problems may mean pregnancy carries heightened dangers. For ex-

¹⁵ Acts 20:35 was actually listed on the American Surrogacy website as an inspiring quote for surrogate mothers. American Surrogacy Blog, “21 Surrogacy Quotes to Share Today,” November 24, 2017, accessed October 9, 2019, <https://www.americansurrogacy.com/blog/21-surrogacy-quotes-to-share-today/>.

¹⁶ Yuri Hibino, “The Advantages and Disadvantages of Altruistic and Commercial Surrogacy in India,” *Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities in Medicine* 18.8 (2023): 2. Please note that I am not advocating belief in karma but only pointing out the varied religious reasonings offered for surrogacy around the world.

¹⁷ American Surrogacy, “The 13 Benefits of Surrogacy that You Need to Know,” <https://www.americansurrogacy.com/surrogacy/benefits-of-surrogacy>.

ample, diabetes can create serious problems in the mother and the baby. Or, a woman may have genital herpes, which can be passed to the baby during birth. Likewise, women with lupus are at increased risk for preterm birth and stillbirth.¹⁸ Surrogacy helps women unable to carry children on their own by engaging surrogates with healthier bodies to become pregnant on behalf of the women with health dangers.

A woman has a right to do what she wants with her body.

Autonomy-based moral reasoning insists a woman has a right to do what she wants with her own body and thus surrogacy should be permitted. If a woman chooses to volunteer or be paid as a surrogate, the use of her womb is her own business and no one else should tell her what she may or may not do with her body. Denying women the ability to be a surrogate is actually denying a basic human right and an intrusion on her bodily autonomy.

Individuals or couples have a right to their own baby.

The right to have one's own baby, especially a baby genetically related to both parents, is a basic human right and surrogacy enables couples to achieve this goal. If a wife cannot carry a baby to term, then the couple has the right to arrange for a surrogate to carry to term a child from the couple created via IVF. Denying infertile couples this right imposes needless harm on them when a method of alleviating their grief is at hand. Surrogacy gives

some couples the only hope of having a child related to one or both of them.¹⁹

Male homosexual couples also see the right to have children as a basic right. If they are granted the right to marriage, shouldn't they be granted the right to enjoy the fruits of marriage, such as children? Since male homosexual couples do not share a womb, they must engage the use of a surrogate to enjoy having a child related to at least one of them. In these cases, the male homosexual couple may have the surrogate artificially inseminated with one of the men's semen, and the resulting child will actually be the genetic child of the surrogate. In other cases, male homosexual couples may purchase an egg from a first woman, create an embryo using semen from one of the men, and then have the embryo inserted into a second woman, the surrogate mother.

Surrogacy allows the genetic mother to maintain physical attractiveness.

Some couples engage a surrogate so the wife can maintain physical attractiveness. Surrogacy makes it possible for the wife of the intended parents to avoid the changes to the body that result from pregnancy. Doing so means the intended mother can maintain a more youthful appearance and thus increase her self-esteem. Not undergoing the changes associated with pregnancy is seen as self-affirming, and for some women good looks are considered essential to career success. The intended mother can feel positive about her appearance and enhance her own emotional stability. Some

¹⁸ National Institutes of Health, Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, "What are some factors that make pregnancy high risk?" November 6, 2018, <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/high-risk/conditioninfo/factors>.

¹⁹ Department of Health & Social Security, *Report of the Committee of Inquiry Into Human Fertilization and Embryology*, 45.



husbands may want a wife to maintain a young appearance, and a surrogate potentially adds strength to the marriage of the contracting couple in the process.

The American Society of Reproductive Medicine's statement on surrogacy does not address the issue of surrogacy to maintain the intended mother's attractiveness. Their guidelines do say, "Gestational carriers may be used when a true medical condition precludes the [intended parents] from carrying a pregnancy or would pose a significant risk of death or harm to the woman or the fetus."²⁰ This statement indicates the group believes surrogacy should only be used for cases of infertility and not for lesser

pragmatic reasons. The same document also provides several criteria for rejecting intended parents as candidates for using surrogacy but does not mention rejecting such intended parents because they hope to maintain the wife's attractiveness.

Contractual surrogacy is a morally permissible way to earn money, especially for women in poverty.

Surrogacy is a financial windfall for surrogates. If a woman's body is her own then she has a right to "rent" her body for nine months as a surrogate. Around the world, surrogacy is presented as a way for very poor women to earn more money than would otherwise be possible, thus the con-

²⁰ Practice Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine and Practice Committee of the Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology, "Recommendations for Practices Using Gestational Carriers: A Committee Opinion," *Fertility and Sterility* 118.1 (July 2022): 66.

tracting couple is actually doing a good thing. Commercial surrogacy is presented as a win-win for all parties involved.

Surrogacy is no more dangerous than many other jobs.

If being a surrogate mother is dangerous, it is no more dangerous than other jobs. While some may say the surrogate is being engaged to incur life-threatening risks, surrogates may respond that other jobs are associated with a greater degree of risk, but those jobs do not receive moral censure. For example, several workers died building the great American projects of civil engineering — the Golden Gate Bridge and Hoover Dam — but no one makes a moral judgement on those workers for engaging in a risky job.²¹

In January 2019, researchers with *24/7 Wall Street* released a list of the most dangerous jobs in America. Fishers and fishing related workers were ranked as the most dangerous occupation in America, with forty-one fatal injuries in 2017 or 100 per 100,000 workers.²² These same workers earned an average of \$28,310. Since surrogates typically earn over \$30,000 and the fatal injuries occur at a lower rate than other dangerous careers, the practice should not be prohibited merely because of the risk to the surrogates.

If adoption is permissible, why not surrogacy?

The moral permissibility of adoption

leads some to believe surrogacy is permissible as well. The strength of this argument depends on the degree to which adoption and surrogacy are similar. The purported similarities are that in both adoption and surrogacy the birth mother gives up a child to be raised by someone else. Furthermore, in adoption the adoptive parents are not genetically related to the child and in surrogacy one or both of the contracting parents may not be genetically related to the child.

Similarities between surrogacy and adoption noted, the moral permissibility of adoption does not entail the moral permissibility of surrogacy. First, in adoption the child is not created with the intent of being given to an adoptive couple, but instead biological parents are unable to raise the child because of exigencies of various kinds. But the intent was not to create a child who would be given away. Second, adoption is not procreation. Procreation occurs when a child is conceived via sexual intercourse. In contrast, as Oliver O'Donovan notes, “[Adoption] is a charitable vocation indicated to childless couples by the personal tragedy of their deprivation in this area. And although it may richly compensate for the sorrow and satisfy the desire to nurture and educate children, it is still a substitute for procreation rather than a form of procreation.”²³

IV. ARGUMENTS AGAINST SURROGACY

Arguments used to support surrogacy

²¹ The official number of deaths associated with building Hoover Dam is ninety-six. United States Bureau of Reclamation, “Hoover Dam,” March 12, 2015, <https://www.usbr.gov/lc/hooverdam/history/essays/fatal.html#targetText=The%20%22official%22%20number%20of%20fatalities,equipment%2C%20truck%20accidents%2C%20etc..> Eleven workers died building the Golden Gate bridge. See “Frequently Asked Questions About the Golden Gate Bridge,” <http://goldengatebridge.org/research/facts.php>.

²² Michael B. Sauter and Charles Stockdale, “25 Most Dangerous Jobs in America,” *24/7 Wall Street*, January 2, 2019, <https://247wallst.com/special-report/2019/01/02/25-most-dangerous-jobs-in-america-2/6/>.

²³ Oliver O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 40.

represent an inadequate framework for thinking about both procreation and surrogacy. Surrogacy raises deeply profound questions about the nature of human procreation or the begetting of children. O'Donovan commented, "We are asking about our human 'begetting,' that is to say, our capacity to give existence to another human being, not by making him the end of a project of our will, but by imparting to him our being, so that he is formed by what we are and not what we intend."²⁴ In contrast to *begetting* children, surrogacy seems very much to be viewed as *making* children, as if a child is a project to be completed like a model airplane.

Before offering several critiques of surrogacy, a word of clarification needs to be made about the manner in which we discuss surrogate arrangements. In some contexts, surrogacy is touted as a "treatment" for infertility. But surrogacy most decidedly is not a medical treatment for infertility. A medical treatment for infertility would correct the problems in either the husband's or wife's body that prevent the couple from becoming pregnant, allowing them to procreate in the normal manner. Surrogacy corrects nothing in the husband's or wife's body and thus should not be called a treatment. Surrogacy is, instead, a way of circumventing infertility.

Surrogacy is inseparable from moral concerns with IVF.

The morality of surrogacy is inseparable from the disconcerting number of "spare" embryos created via IVF. Precise data regarding the number of human embryos in storage in the US is difficult to ascertain, but one study of IVF cycles between 2004 and 2013 determined that by 2013

"All other critiques of surrogacy should be seen in light of the overarching sanctity-of-life concern. In the process of devaluing the embryo, surrogacy contributes to the commodification of human life."

²⁴ O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?*, 15.

1,237,203 embryos were cryopreserved or were potentially still in storage.²⁵ The fate of these embryos vary considerably, but some are abandoned by the parents while others are thawed and discarded as medical waste. The current practice of IVF in the US is in direct conflict with the principle of the sanctity of human life. Surrogacy facilitates and encourages the creation of more embryos than can be implanted and thus serves as a contributing factor to the destruction of human life. All other critiques of surrogacy should be seen in light of the overarching sanctity-of-life concern.²⁶ In the process of devaluing the embryo, surrogacy contributes to the commodification of human life.

Surrogacy commodifies human life.

Surrogacy commodifies human life and treats infants as products rather than humans. The surrogate mother gives birth to a child that was conceived and carried to term with the full intent of giving the child to another. The notion that a mother would undertake to become a parent — for the pregnant surrogate is a parent — with intention beforehand to alienate herself from the child implicitly converts the child from a person to a commodity.²⁷ In this way, surrogacy further violates the sanctity-of-human-life principle by treat-

ing humans as something to be passed around via contractual agreements as opposed to receiving the child as a fellow human made in God's image.

Surrogacy appears to be a case of selling babies. The surrogate carries a baby to term and then hands the child over to someone else for a fee. Both parties in the trade are purportedly acting voluntarily, though usually there are profound social disparities between the intended parents and the surrogate. The entire process is treated as a business transaction, and the key component is a *tiny human being*. To put it most brutally, surrogacy is a market with buyers — the intended parents — and suppliers — the surrogate mothers.²⁸ If children were not involved, these parties would have no reason to interact with each other. Surrogacy is an economic exchange and it is big business.

But the commodification of children in surrogacy is welded to the practice of IVF. The reason multiple embryos are made at once when the technicians know only a few will be implanted is that doing so is *more efficient* — it is simply easier and more cost-efficient to create multiple embryos at once as opposed to creating and implanting one or two at a time. This is the language of industrial-

²⁵ Mindy S. Christianson, Judy E. Stern, Fangbai Sun, Heping Zhang, Aaron K. Styer, Wendy Vitek, and Alex J. Polotsky, "Embryo Cryopreservation and Utilization in the United States from 2004 – 2013," *F & S Reports* 1.2 (September 2020): 73. This number is an estimate and the researchers could not account for the fate of many of the embryos, thus the final count was undoubtedly a bit high.

²⁶ Something similar to IVF occurs in the ancient Hindu epic of the *Mahabharata*. One of the prominent characters is Gandhari, the princess of the Gandhara Kingdom and wife of Dhritrashtra. In the story, Gandhari has an unusually long pregnancy after which she gives birth to a lump of immovable flesh. This lump of flesh was divided into 100 pieces which were put into jars in which ghee (clarified butter) was added and incubated. Finally, 101 children were born one by one. One group of researchers commented on this story and said, "This narrative is strongly reminiscent of *in vitro* fertilization (IVF), with the multiple pregnancies that commonly occur with it. In Gandhari's case, however, the description mirrors an extra-uterine gestation, a scientific fear that future researchers may be able to achieve." Bharti Kalra, Manash P. Baruah, and Sanjay Kalra, "The Mahabharat and Reproductive Endocrinology," *Indian Journal of Endocrinology and Metabolism* 20.3 (May – June 2016): 405. This is the oldest reference to something like IVF I can find in religious literature.

²⁷ O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?*, 37.

²⁸ Carol Sanger, "Developing Markets in Baby-Making: In the Matter of Baby M," *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender* 30 (2007): 71, 75.

ized manufacturing in which a child is treated as a product that can be produced more or less efficiently. In IVF, children are not procreated, they are *made*, and as O'Donovan noted forty years ago that "when we start making human beings we necessarily stop loving them," adding as well, "that which is made rather than begotten becomes something we have at our disposal."²⁹ In surrogacy, a child is

a perfectly healthy child you are wanted; if you are a child with a birth defect, you are a defective product.

In John 9, Jesus encountered a man born with the congenital birth defect of blindness. The apostles asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" To which Jesus answered, "It was neither *that* this man

"Children with the most profound difficulties are not faulty products to be thrown away but opportunities for God's mercy and grace."

not procreated as much as it is the product resulting from a giant project involving contracting parents, gamete donors, the surrogate and her family, technicians, and physicians. And imperfect children are *disposed of*.

The notion of efficiency in producing children enables the idea that children with birth defects are treated as flawed products. The goal for contracting couples in modern surrogate arrangements is not just the birth of a child, but the birth of a *perfect* child with no anomalies, disorders, or birth defects. This too violates the sanctity-of-human-life principle. When procreation is within marriage, the assumption is that children are to be received regardless of their imperfections. But in surrogacy, the outlay of money and time is intended to achieve a perfect child, an attitude with eugenic overtones: If you are

sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:2–3). Here we see the sovereignty of God over even disabilities of the most profound type. Children with the most profound difficulties are not faulty products to be thrown away but opportunities for God's mercy and grace.

Surrogacy invariably treats children as products in numerous ways, but one observation from the American Society for Reproductive Medicine's position statement on surrogacy is noteworthy. Discussing the health of a gestational carrier, the statement says potential surrogates should be examined to identify those "who might be at high risk of HIV, STIs, or other acquired infections that might be transmissible to the fetus."³⁰ Yet what is to be done if the surrogate contracts an STI *after* becoming pregnant? The unstat-

²⁹ O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?*, 65.

³⁰ American Society for Reproductive Medicine, "Recommendations for Practices Using Gestational Carriers: A Committee Opinion," 2022, <https://www.asrm.org/practice-guidance/practice-committee-documents/recommendations-for-practices-using-gestational-carriers-a-committee-opinion-2022/>.

ed assumption is that in such cases the business transaction has gone awry and the product has potential to be damaged and should thus be discarded via abortion. The entire process treats the surrogate herself like a baby-growing machine.

Treating surrogate mothers like a baby-making machine.

Surrogacy not only commodifies the child but commodifies the surrogate herself by treating her like a baby-making machine. Some suggest the woman is merely renting her uterus the way one would rent out an apartment. But God did not design any human to be analogous to either a machine or an apartment. Surrogate mothers are real people who become attached to the babies they are carrying. A surrogate mother is not just a “gestational carrier,” she is a living, breathing person with emotions who can become attached to the child being carried.

Exploitation of surrogate mothers seems especially egregious when the intended mother is perfectly capable of carrying a child but finds the whole process of pregnancy bothersome. Or a husband may not want his wife to gain weight associated with pregnancy. In these cases, a couple wants a child but does not want the associated responsibility and concerns of pregnancy: A surrogate is used strictly for the purposes of convenience. As the 1984 Warnock report from Great Britain said, “In the first place we are all agreed that surrogacy for convenience alone, that is, where a woman is physically ca-

pable of bearing a child but does not wish to undergo pregnancy, is totally ethically unacceptable.”³¹ And yet the practice is common worldwide. And in countries where surrogacy for convenience is outlawed, the couples engage in surrogacy tourism and travel around the globe to find women willing to carry a child.

By treating another person as a living incubator, contracting couples are dehumanizing another human being.³² A widely accepted canon of ethics is that we should never treat other humans as a means to our own purposes or goals, but should place that person’s own worth as someone made in the image of God as primary. Some may perhaps limit this objection to contractual surrogacy alone and not to altruistic surrogacy, but in either case one woman’s body is being used to meet the goals of another person or couple. The surrogate’s usefulness and worth is severed from her personality and individuality and is directly tied to one purpose: producing a baby.

The degree to which surrogacy treats a woman as a baby-making machine was magnified by the Baby Gammy case from Thailand in 2014. In December 2013, a Thai surrogate named Pattaramon Janbua gave birth to twins — one boy and one girl — for an Australian couple, David Farnell and Wendy Li. During the pregnancy, it was discovered that the boy had Down syndrome. After the surrogate gave birth to both children, Farnell and Li left for Australia taking only the baby girl and leaving the little boy — Baby Gammy — with the surrogate mother in Thailand. To complicate matters,

³¹ Department of Health & Social Security, *Report of the Committee of Inquiry Into Human Fertilization and Embryology*, 46.

³² Some surrogates have said things as crude as, “I’m just the oven; it’s their bun!”

the surrogate then wanted custody of both children. In 2016, an Australian family court ruled the girl would remain with her biological parents and Australian Justice Thackray said in the decision:

Quite apart from the separation of the twins, this case serves to highlight the dilemmas that arise when the reproductive capacities of women are turned into saleable commodities, with all the usual fallout when contracts go wrong. The facts also demonstrate the conflicts of interest that arise when middlemen rush to profit from the demand of a market in which the comparatively rich benefit from the preparedness of the poor to provide a service that the rich either cannot or will not perform.³³

Indeed, when wealthy people secure middlemen to engage poor women as surrogates, the woman loses her identity and her worth is only tied to her ability to provide a functioning womb, and in many ways the entire process bears close resemblance to slavery.

Surrogacy resembles slavery.

In slavery, one human owns another human and uses the slave for purposes desired by the owner. Surrogacy is not exactly like slavery in that the surrogate is paid, but it bears some similarity to slavery in that one human owns the rights to what another human may do to her body during pregnancy. Even more deeply,

the contracting couple claims ownership over the surrogate's procreative ability.

This analogy to slavery is amplified when wealthy people contract poor women to carry their babies. It is rarely wealthy women who engage themselves as a surrogate. Instead, surrogates are usually women in need of cash, and in this sense they share with the slave the status of a person in a position of weakness who is open to exploitation by more powerful people.

Concerns about the analogy between slavery and surrogacy are directly related to the issue of the exploitation of women who serve as surrogates. In commercial surrogacy, the contracting agency or surrogacy broker keeps much of the fee. Horsey says, "Furthermore, there is often a wide disparity between agency and other fees and the amount that surrogates are paid: in many cases what the surrogate receives is a small fraction of the total that intended parents spend."³⁴

The analogy between slavery and surrogacy is amplified by concerns about human trafficking of potential surrogates. In Yuri Hibino's analysis of the changing practices of surrogacy in India, she interviewed a surrogacy agent. This unnamed individual commented on the effects of more restrictive Indian laws and said, "We now have a plan to transfer Indian surrogate mothers to another country where embryo transfer and delivery can happen, as foreigners are prohibited from entering India to procure surrogacy."³⁵ One can imagine how such

³³ Family Court of Western Australia, *Farnell & Anor and Chanbua*, (April 14, 2016): 175, paragraph 756. The case was complicated by claims from Pattaramon that the contracting parents asked her to abort the Down syndrome boy, claims the Australian court did not find compelling.

³⁴ Horsey, "The Future of Surrogacy," 2.

³⁵ Yuri Hibino, "The Advantages and Disadvantages of Altruistic and Commercial Surrogacy in India," 6.

an unscrupulous person would deduct airline expenses, housing, and healthcare in another country from the poor surrogate's fee. In worst case scenarios, a surrogate could be trafficked to another country where her abusers hold her identification papers promising to return them only if she will be a surrogate again and again.

Does surrogacy actually increase a poor woman's net worth? Good data would compare poor women from a certain area who were not surrogates with poor women from the same area who were surrogates and compare and contrast their net worth prior to the surrogacy and perhaps one, three, and five years later. Five years later, would the surrogates have a higher net worth than women who were not surrogates? I know of no such data like this regarding surrogacy. What is certain is that sound education, good job opportunities, exercising sexual restraint, and staying away from drugs and alcohol are all strongly correlated with breaking free from cycles of poverty. Why not work to enable poor women to have these opportunities as opposed to a risky venture such as surrogacy? Nonetheless, the Scriptural account of Abraham and Hagar only amplifies concerns about the slavery-surrogacy analogy.

The case of Abraham and Hagar gives us reason to pause when we consider surrogacy.

Genesis 16:1 – 4 (NIV): Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maid-servant named Hagar; so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to



what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maid-servant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.

The one biblical story most analogous to surrogacy is the story of Abram, Sarai, and Hagar in Genesis 16. Even though Abram and Sarai struggled with infertility, God promised Abram they would become pregnant and that "your very own son shall be your heir" (Gen 15:4). But the child would come on God's timetable, not theirs. In unbelief and impatience, Abram and Sarai decided to introduce a third party into the reproductive relationship.³⁶ Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant [Hagar]; it may be that I

³⁶ C. Ben Mitchell and D. Joy Riley, *Christian Bioethics* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2014), 124.

shall obtain children by her” (Gen 16:2).

Hagar was forced to become a surrogate because she was a slave, being specifically identified as a maidservant.³⁷ The Hebrew word הַפְּדָיָה/ šīp̄hāh means Hagar was not a common slave but the personal servant of her mistress, Sarai.³⁸ Abram reinforces Hagar’s lower status when he agrees that Sarai has authority over Hagar to make her have sex with him. Hagar is also referred to as an Egyptian on two occasions (16:1, 3), and as a foreign-born slave she had little significance in the eyes of the household. Hagar’s insignificance is accentuated by the absence of Sarai speaking directly to Hagar in the passage — the maidservant is almost disembodied and a vehicle for reproduction. Matthews says, “Sarai never speaks directly to Hagar or speaks her name; Hagar is a tool to relieve Sarai’s embarrassment.”³⁹ After consummating the relationship, Hagar’s status may have been elevated from merely a slave. Fensham argued Sarai’s request in Genesis 21:10 that Abraham “drive out” Hagar indicates Hagar may have been viewed as a second wife to Abraham since “drive out”/ *gērās* was used as a technical term for divorce in the Old Testament.⁴⁰

Hagar’s standing as a handmaid and later a type of second-class wife illuminates her lack of moral agency in the decision to have sex with Abram. Without affirming Delores Williams’ hermeneutic (with which I strongly disagree), she gets at the

coercion implied in the passage when she says, “While Hagar had no choices in matters of forced motherhood, the law provided options for wealthy free women like Sarai who were barren.”⁴¹ Williams’ use of the word “law” is too strong for the context as the OT law had not been given yet and legal authorities and law codes were at best sparse in Abram’s Canaan. What she really means is *custom*. Yet her point that a wealthy woman takes advantage of a woman of lower social standing for the purposes of raising up a child should not be overlooked. The similarities to modern surrogacy in which wealthy women and couples invariably contract a surrogate from a lower socio-economic class are striking.

Hagar’s loss of moral agency alerts us to further reasons why surrogacy is analogous to slavery. Consider the stress that can occur in relationships between contracting couples and the surrogate. What if the biological mother and the surrogate have completely different perspectives on what is best for the developing baby? As Elly Teman notes, “Both women [biological mother and surrogate] straddle a delicate position vis-à-vis one another in terms of control: each has reason to feel loss of control during the process, just as each has reason to blame the other party for misusing her power.”⁴² Quite often, the contracting couple insists their wishes should be followed at every step, and in this sense, are dictating authority over what a woman

³⁷ Feminist/womanist author Delores Williams said, “Hagar had no control over her own body. It belonged to her slave owner, whose husband ravished Hagar.” Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 3.

³⁸ Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 11:2–50:26*, The New American Commentary, vol. 1b (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 184.

³⁹ Matthews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 184.

⁴⁰ C. Charles Fensham, “The Son of a Handmaid in Northwest Semitic,” *Vetus Testamentum* 19.3 (July 1969): 318.

⁴¹ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 15.

⁴² Elly Teman, *Birthing a Mother: The Surrogate Body and the Pregnant Self* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 5.

may or may not do with her body, a situation much like Hagar who was not able to decide how her own body was used.

Hagar functioned as a primitive form of “surrogate mother.” Abram and Sarai asked God for a child, but when the child did not come as quickly as they had hoped, they took matters into their own hands and Abram had sex with Hagar. The rash actions of Abram and Sarai resulted in subsequent relational chaos within their family.⁴³ As Bill Arnold comments, “But the narrative of Genesis 16 is clear that this was a matter of God’s people making other arrangements without his direction, trying to ‘help God out’ of a predicament.”⁴⁴ While we must be careful not to use Genesis 16 as a basis for a knee-jerk rejection of every new technology, the bad consequences of Abram’s choice in this matter challenges us to consider our options carefully before women are contracted as surrogates. Hagar was a slave and modern surrogacy bears strong resemblance to slavery as well.

Surrogacy and prostitution.

Similar to concerns about slavery, surrogacy bears striking similarity to prostitution. Prostitution is when one person sells his or her body for sexual use by another person and it is strictly forbidden in Scripture. Likewise, in surrogacy it is the surrogate’s body which is being sold for the temporary use of someone else. Surrogacy is closely related to sex because the child the surrogate is carrying comes from the reproductive cells of either one or both of

the intended parents; she is accepting payment for the use of her body in an activity closely associated with sex.

A counterargument would say that surrogacy is not like prostitution and such a comparison is offensive. Unlike prostitution, no one *actually* has sexual intercourse in a surrogacy arrangement. But such counterarguments fail to acknowledge that in both prostitution and surrogacy, a woman’s body is temporarily used by another person or persons in an act of which the normal outcome is procreation. Furthermore, in both prostitution and commercial surrogacy, money is the medium of exchange for the use of the woman’s body. In both cases, the woman’s body is used to gain an intended outcome for someone else. In the case of prostitution, the woman’s body serves as an object for someone else’s sexual pleasure. In the case of surrogacy, the woman’s body serves as an object to carry a child to term.

Surrogacy is not like adoption.

Some argue surrogacy is no different from the long-accepted practice of adoption, pointing out that in both cases the birth mother or birth parents surrender a child to someone else who will raise the child. But comments from Oliver O’Donovan about Artificial Insemination by Donor (AID) are helpful in morally evaluating surrogacy. O’Donovan notes that AID is sometimes compared to adoption, but he shows at least two flaws in the AID-adoption analogy which are also relevant to the

⁴³ One surrogacy agency in Montana claimed, “Sarah and Abraham raised that child [Ishmael] as their own.” From the narrative of Genesis, it is not clear that Ishmael was ever raised by Abram and Sarai together but he was raised by Hagar with the child being viewed as sort of an appendage to the family. Montana Surrogacy, “A Brief History of Surrogacy,” July 10, 2018, <https://www.montanasurro.com/blog/2018/7/8/history-of-surrogacy-a-timeline/>.

⁴⁴ Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 96.

“surrogacy drives a severe and unmerited wedge between the relational and procreative aspects of sex”

surrogacy-adoption analogy. First, in both AID and adoption, the biological parents never stop being the child’s parents in a certain sense. Likewise, in surrogacy the surrogate herself is referred to by all types of circumlocutions, such as “gestational carrier,” all in an attempt to deny that she is a *parent*. Second, AID is unlike adoption because in adoption the replacement of the birth parents with adoptive parents is occasioned only by the birth parents’ incapacity to fulfil their role. O’Donovan notes that adoption is quite different because the biological parents “do not act for adoptive parents; adoptive parents act for them.”⁴⁵ Likewise, in surrogacy the pregnancy is created with the intention from the very beginning of giving the child to another family, fundamentally differentiating surrogacy from adoption. Surrogacy is less like adoption and perhaps more like adultery.

Surrogacy and adultery.

Collaborative procreation intersects with the moral rule against adultery. Adultery occurs when a married person has sex with someone who is not his or her spouse. Adultery not only distorts God’s purposes for

sex, adultery introduces a third party into a marriage covenant intended to be exclusively between a husband and wife. The surrogate carries the child for a couple, which is intended to be done by the wife in marriage. Of course, many women face infertility problems and are unable to carry a child to term, but contracting a surrogate still brings a third party into the marriage. Furthermore, if the surrogate also provided the egg, the husband has technically fathered a child with another woman, which very much looks like adultery. Surrogacy introduces a third party into the process of procreation which should be confined to the loving partnership between two people, and is an attack on the value of the marital relationship.⁴⁶

Surrogacy can also resemble adultery when the surrogate herself is married. When a wife agrees to carry another couple’s baby, then the surrogate and her husband have taken the product of another couple’s conception into the wife’s womb. She is not carrying a child conceived with her husband, she is carrying someone else’s child. In this way, surrogacy is even more complicated than adultery. If a woman becomes pregnant in an adulter-

⁴⁵ O’Donovan, *Begotten or Made?*, 37.

⁴⁶ Department of Health & Social Security, *Report of the Committee of Inquiry Into Human Fertilization and Embryology*, 44.

ous relationship, the subsequent child has one father, a stranger who has intruded into the marriage relationship. But when a woman carries the embryo conceived via IVF from a contracting couple, two other strangers have intruded into the surrogate's marriage covenant — the contracting husband and contracting wife.

A respondent could contend there are relevant differences between surrogacy and adultery. First, adultery is defined as sexual intercourse between a married person and someone who is not his or her spouse. In surrogacy, no sexual intercourse has occurred. Second, adultery is usually secretive and done by keeping the matter hidden from a spouse. In contrast, surrogacy is done with the consent of both the husband and wife. Indeed, surrogacy doesn't involve sexual intercourse and is done, ideally, with mutual consent of the husband and wife. But the fact that surrogacy involves a third party and the sharing of gametes with someone outside of a marriage should give us pause before rejecting the relevancy of adultery-based concerns.

The concern about similarities is not limited to the contracting couple but extends to the surrogate herself. While some might argue that a surrogate is not performing something like adultery but an act closer to adoption, I think the appeal to a similarity to adoption is weak. In adoption one comes to the aid of biological parents who were unable to raise a child which was not conceived with such ends in mind; the original goal was not to conceive a child and then hand off the infant. Adoption is charitable intervention into a previously

existing crisis. But a surrogate is intentionally inserting herself into a previously existing marriage. To take another's child into one's family is a totally different type of act from taking another person's gamete or another couple's embryo into one's body and then handing a baby off.⁴⁷

Here the issue of surrogacy profoundly intersects with procreational and relational or unitive purposes of sex within marriage. Sexual intercourse is a gift which strongly bonds a husband and wife together in the marital embrace in joyful celebration of the love shared within the marriage covenant. When the bodies of both the husband and wife are not affected by problems of infertility, then children are procreated by the couple. *The act of procreation occurs between the two of them within a marriage.* It seems surrogacy drives a severe and unmerited wedge between the relational and procreative aspects of sex, harshly isolating the two in ways not imagined by Scripture. And because adultery involves a third party intruding into a couple's procreation, I think concerns about adultery are relevant when discussing surrogacy even though no actual sexual intercourse is involved. I concur with O'Donovan that harshly bifurcating the relational and procreative aspects of sex in marriage invites us to think that "the procreative good may be fulfilled in any way at all, not necessarily by the exclusive communion of procreational power."⁴⁸

An infertile couple may rebel quite fiercely at this reasoning and exclaim, "We are celebrating the unitive aspects of marriage but due to circumstances far beyond our control we are utterly incapable of procreating!"

⁴⁷ I am borrowing here directly from O'Donovan in his discussion of artificial insemination by donor. *Begotten or Made?*, 37.

⁴⁸ O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?*, 39.

From the perspective of a couple unable to become pregnant, it may seem as if the procreative purposes of sex have already been bifurcated from their marriage, thus the use of alternative means of having children is permitted. But the underlying links between the relational and procreative aspects of sex are inherent in the design of marriage. The pain of infertility points to the ways in which the Fall has negatively affected our world at many tragic levels, but that does not change the nature of the covenant of marriage itself. Infertility's grief does not justify the moral rearrangement of the very nature of procreation itself in any manner we see fit.

We have been discussing concerns about adultery as a moral warning for use of surrogacy in the context of infertile couples. But we must not forget that many couples seek surrogates for reasons unrelated to infertility. Many perfectly healthy couples completely able to procreate want a surrogate to maintain the contracting wife's attractiveness or merely because pregnancy would impede career goals or is just viewed as an inconvenience regarding time management. In these cases, the warnings about adultery are amplified because the couple is inviting a third party into the act of procreation out of reasons which can only be described as self-centered. The couple's gametes are placed in someone else merely for convenience or personal preference, much as adultery serves to meet idolatrous, self-centered desires.

Some forms of surrogacy are based on an idolatrous view of physical attractiveness.

When intended parents engage a surrogate not because of infertility but to maintain the wife's physical attractiveness, unrealis-

tic standards of physical beauty have become an idol. The effects of time, age, and children do not give a husband the excuse not to love his wife. Instead, husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the church (Eph 5:25). To condition love or attraction to one's wife on her maintaining a perpetually young appearance is to place something else in front of God's command that "love never fails" (1 Cor 13:8).

Scripture never criticizes tasteful attention to one's appearance in public. Concern for presenting oneself in the best light can be seen in Naomi's instruction to Ruth in her romance with Boaz, "Wash yourself therefore, and anoint yourself and put on your *best* clothes, and go down to the threshing floor" (Ruth 3:3a). Likewise, the Shulamite's lover in the Song of Songs adoringly refers to her as "the most beautiful among women" (Song of Songs 1:8). Yes, a woman's sense of confident attractiveness is celebrated in Scripture, but this is not the sum of her worth. True beauty is found in a life surrendered to Jesus Christ. First Peter 3:3–4 describes this deeper beauty and says, "Your adornment must not be *merely* external — braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but *let it be* the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God."

The argument in favor of surrogacy to maintain the intended mother's physical attractiveness incorporates at least three flawed ideas. First, an unstated assumption is that a woman who has had a child is less attractive than a woman who has not had a child. This assumption incorporates shallow cultural views of beauty and is based on our sex-crazed culture's unrealistic expectations about the aes-

thetic value of a woman emerging from the influences of salacious and lascivious literature. Second, the contracting mother is perfectly happy for the surrogate to undergo changes to her body which the contracting mother has no desire to endure herself. In this way, the intended parents devalue the very act of pregnancy through which a child is born. Third, securing a surrogate in order to maintain physical attractiveness suggests pregnancy is reserved for *unattractive women*. Surrogacy reinforces misogynistic ideas that some women are of less value than other women because of unrealistic standards of beauty.

Surrogacy and new social agendas.

Homosexual men use surrogate mothers to produce children for their relationship. For example, Elton John and his same-sex marriage partner David Furnish have used surrogates to father two sons.⁴⁹ Homosexual men either have the surrogate artificially inseminated and she carries the baby to term or homosexual men use their own sperm along with an egg purchased from an egg bank to create an embryo which is implanted in the surrogate mother. The surrogate carries the baby to term and then the infant is handed over to the homosexual couple. At the most extreme edges of the new social agenda, some lesbians suggest men may not even be necessary for reproduction in the future, and the DNA of two eggs can be used to create a human life.

Homosexual relationships are strictly forbidden by Scripture (Rom 1:24–27). Surro-

gacy further transgresses moral boundaries by encouraging same-sex couples to mimic the procreative purposes for marriage women into creation. But we must be clear: A child conceived via IVF for a homosexual couple will only result from the gametes of one member of the couple, and in this sense same-sex couples never procreate.

CONCLUSION

I oppose the practice of surrogacy because it is directly connected to the sanctity-of-life concerns related to IVF, it resembles slavery, prostitution, and adultery, its analogy to adoption is flawed, and it commodifies both the infant and the surrogate. Though there might be an extremely rare case of altruistic surrogacy where the practice is not sin, I cannot see where it is ever advisable or wise.⁵⁰ Even in a supposedly altruistic scenario from the most generous of motives, we must never forget that the birth mother is *still the mother* and the ensuing complications in family dynamics when the child delivered by one family member is then raised by other family members is loaded with an unlimited number of relational complications, all of which will add stress and confusion to the most important person in the entire arrangement — the child.

Confused argumentation about surrogacy abounds. On one occasion, it was suggested to me that the virgin conception of Jesus Christ in some vague manner justifies the modern practice of surrogacy. My interlocutor suggested Mary was a surrogate. But this analogy is quite flawed. A surrogate gives up

⁴⁹ Lady Gaga is the godmother for both children.

⁵⁰ Megan Best says something similar: "Even though I am hesitant to recommend legal surrogacy, I believe that if no donor gametes are used, altruistic surrogacy is not necessarily inherently immoral. This is not to say, however, that it is a wise choice." Megan Best, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2012), 372. I am not addressing the issue of embryo adoption in this essay.

a child to be raised by someone else while Mary never gave up her baby to someone else but raised the Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, God the Father never abandoned Jesus nor was Mary paid in any way for her services. Confused references to the virgin birth in an effort to justify modern surrogacy reflect the backwards moral reflection common in our culture; once an idea is embraced, then people search Scripture for anything vaguely justifying the choice without engaging in robust moral reflection.

Discussing the virgin birth and surrogacy illustrates the frustrating aspects of surrogacy discussions in what seems to be the perpetual lack of moral reflection or the sloppy use of motivational quotes to support surrogacy. For example, I once encountered a surrogacy website which cited quotes from both John Bunyan and Mother Teresa to inspire people involved in the surrogacy process, but the managers of the webpage seemed completely oblivious to the fact that both Bunyan and Mother Teresa would be appalled at the practice of surrogacy.⁵¹ Such faulty moral reasoning as citing Bunyan and Mother Teresa to support surrogacy reflects our culture's even more confused manner of moral considerations. In many discussions of surrogacy, the assumption seems to be, "Well, if modern science makes it possible, then it must be acceptable." But modern science makes any number of things possible which right-thinking Christians will oppose. We are not utilitarians and the ends do not justify the means for God's people. ✕

Dr. J. Alan Branch is Professor of Christian Ethics at Midwestern Seminary and author of 50 Ethical Questions: Biblical Wisdom for Confusing Times and Affirming God's Image: Addressing the Transgender Question with Science and Scripture. He is also the pastor of First Baptist Church At The Villages.

⁵¹ See <https://info.worldwidesurrogacy.org/blog/inspiring-surrogacy-quotes>. The same webpage cites singer Sheryl Crow as saying, "Little souls find their way to you, whether they're from your womb or someone else's." In context, Crow was referring to her *adopted* son Wyatt. Adoption is completely different from surrogacy! Concerning the use of sources by this webpage, I would suggest to the page managers that "a change would do you good" (to take Sheryl Crow out of context less egregiously).

Infertility and the “Package Deal” of Marriage, Sex, and Procreation

INTRODUCTION

Imagine you're cleaning up after your mother's fiftieth birthday party when she pulls you aside, her expression uneasy. She takes your hands and says, "I need to tell you something. You have two sisters you've never known about."

Shock and confusion flood your mind. Questions spill out: "Where do they live? What are their names? Can I meet them?" After a long pause, she responds, "They haven't been born yet."

This sounds like the opening of a gripping drama — but it reflects the experience of a growing number of people today. Nearly fifty years since the first child was born using in vitro fertilization (IVF), this technology has radically

changed our understanding of procreation and parenthood.

On the one hand, it's resulted in the birth of approximately one million children who are no less formed, fashioned, and made in God's image than naturally conceived children.

But on the other hand, the fertility industry's reliance on IVF as a one-size-fits-all solution leaves us with pressing questions about (1) the root causes of infertility, (2) moral problems with how doctors practice IVF, and (3) God's good design for the "package deal" of marriage, sex, and procreation.

This essay will explore these three areas and consider God's good design for family flourishing amidst developments

in reproductive technology.

INFERTILITY IN MEDICAL AND BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the past year, IVF has moved from being a quiet, personal decision to a major national debate. This shift has brought attention to a deeper crisis: rising infertility rates, outdated reproductive health care, and the longing many couples have for personalized treatment options to heal their infertility.

Discussing this issue first requires a proper understanding of infertility. Infertility is not a disease in itself; rather, it's a *symptom* of underlying reproductive health conditions. Put another way, infertility isn't a singular disease one can "catch," but rather the overflow of deeper health issues that result in a person's difficulty in conceiving or gestating a child.

For women, these underlying reproductive health conditions include endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), blocked fallopian tubes, uterine fibroids, and hormonal imbalances. For men, such conditions include low sperm count, low sperm motility, erectile dysfunction, and lifestyle factors such as diet, exercise, and environmental toxins.

While it's tempting to think of infertili-

ty as "a woman's problem," studies show that couples bear the burden of infertility equally.¹ Moreover, researchers estimate that a couple's diagnosis of infertility is typically the result of four or more unaddressed reproductive health conditions.² Today, sixteen percent of U.S. couples live with a diagnosis of infertility, but most "treatment" options fail to address their underlying reproductive health conditions.³ Instead, these so-called treatments rely on methods that circumvent the man's and woman's body.

To see this circumvention, one need only look at "treatment" for endometriosis, which is one of the leading causes of infertility in women (affecting an estimated ten percent of U.S. women of childbearing-age).⁴ It takes an average of six to eleven years for a woman to receive a diagnosis, and the quality of treatment options vary by doctor.⁵ In many cases, couples are referred to a fertility clinic long before doctors give them diagnosis of or treatment for the underlying condition(s).

It's true that IVF results in the creation of embryos, but if the underlying conditions and overall health are not addressed, then the ability to create a healthy embryo and support it through pregnancy will remain limited.

In recent years, we've grown in our abili-

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "How Common Is Male Infertility, and What Are Its Causes?" Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, last modified, November 18, 2023, www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/menshealth/conditioninfo/infertility#:~:text=Overall%2C%20one%2Dthird%20of%20infertility,combine%20with%20a%20woman's%20egg.

² Joseph B Stanford, et al., "International Natural Procreative Technology Evaluation and Surveillance of Treatment for Subfertility (iNEST): enrollment and methods." *Reproductive Sciences*, no. 29 (January 2022), doi:10.1093/hropen/hoac033, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9373967/>.

³ World Health Organization, "1 in 6 people globally are affected by infertility," last modified April 4, 2023, <https://www.who.int/news/item/04-04-2023-1-in-6-people-globally-affected-by-infertility>.

⁴ S. Rahman, et al., "Eyes, menstruation and endometriosis." *Facts, Views & Vision in ObGyn* 15, no. 2 (June 2023): 107-113, doi:10.52054/FVVO.15.2.074, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37436046/>.

⁵ Rahman, "Eyes, menstruation and endometriosis."

ty to understand infertility. But since sin entered the world in Genesis 3, our bodies simply have not functioned as they ought. This reality is reflected in Genesis 3:16 when God tells Eve that he “will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.” Here, the Hebrew word for pain does not merely refer to the physical pain of labor, but to a deeper fear and futility that will accompany each aspect of procreation — from the pain of infertility and miscarriage to a complete lack of desire to have children.

Infertility is a common motif throughout the Old Testament. Each of the “Big Three” patriarchs — Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachel — dealt with infertility, with others like Hannah similarly crying out for a child.

These examples reflect God’s care for those struggling with infertility, but they also reinforce an important point: our desire for a child, however “right,” does not justify using any means necessary to achieve this end. Indeed, this is why Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 127:3 speak of children as a gift and not a right (e.g., Abram’s use of Hagar to conceive a child).

WHAT IS IVF?

Simply put, IVF (which makes up ninety-nine percent of all assisted reproductive technology procedures) involves the fertilization of a woman’s egg with a man’s sperm in a petri dish.⁶ This sounds simple, but the development of third-party reproduction

(including purchasing egg and sperm from a donor bank or hiring a surrogate-mother) adds additional pieces to the puzzle.

These technologies have sparked a childbearing revolution, raising serious moral questions. What happens to the embryos created in a lab? Should embryos be frozen, tested, or discarded? And what responsibility do parents have toward the children they create through IVF?

Instead of relying on advancements in reproductive medicine, many doctors refer parents to IVF as the best, or only, course of action. Here, it’s worth noting that whether an embryo is created in a lab by doctors or conceived naturally in a woman’s body, each is a distinct and living human being complete with his or her own genetic makeup. Thus, IVF deals with *actual* life, not potential life.

Once doctors create an embryo in IVF, parents have five options before them: they can implant, freeze, destroy, donate to research, or place the embryo up for adoption. All but immediate implantation require parents to indefinitely freeze human life or destroy it outright.

In many cases, parents are encouraged to use preimplantation genetic testing (PGT) to help decide what to do with each embryo. PGT allows doctors to discern an embryo’s sex, potential health concerns, and even intellectual aptitude. In the United States, more than seventy-five percent of fertility clinics⁷ offer PGT for

⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “Fact Sheet: In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) Use Across the United States,” last modified March 13, 2024, <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2024/03/13/fact-sheet-in-vitro-fertilization-ivf-use-across-united-states.html>.

⁷ William D. Winkelman, et al. “Public perspectives on the use of preimplantation genetic diagnosis.” *Journal of Assisted Reproduction and Genetics* 32, no. 5 (March 2015): 665–75, doi:10.1007/s10815-015-0456-8, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4429433/>.

genetic issues, and seventy-three percent offer⁸ testing for sex selection or eye color.

These technologies quickly shift the question from “desire to have a child” to “desire to have a *certain* kind of child.” While it’s natural for parents to have specific hopes and dreams for their child, embryonic screening takes this to a whole new level, allowing parents to determine not just how they *nurture* their child but also the child’s actual genetic *nature*.

And IVF raises significant difficulties for both parents and children.

From a parental perspective, IVF is a costly financial, physical, and emotional experience. A single cycle of IVF may range from \$12,000 to \$30,000, with an overall *failure rate* of seventy-six percent.⁹ And the process itself requires women to undergo risky hormone injections, egg retrievals, implantation procedures, and higher rates of pregnancy complications. (For more on these specific concerns, read here¹⁰ and here.¹¹)

And parents’ self-sacrificial love should compel them to consider IVF from the

perspective of their child’s well-being and biblical teachings.

From this perspective, it’s worth considering that IVF results in additional health risks for children, including preterm birth,¹² low birth weight,¹³ cancer,¹⁴ congenital heart defects,¹⁵ non-chromosomal genetic problems,¹⁶ and autism.¹⁷

As Oliver O’Donovan says, “There is a world of difference between accepting the risk of a disabled child (where that risk is imposed upon us by nature) and ourselves imposing that risk in pursuit of our own purposes.”¹⁸ It’s one thing to receive one’s child regardless of their health or capabilities, but it’s quite another to intentionally create children through a process that places them in harm’s way.

Further, parents bear a moral duty and responsibility toward their children, including to “leftover” embryos created in IVF. For Christians, who mirror their lives after the radical hospitality of Christ, the tension between feeling like one’s family is complete and the presence of leftover embryos should compel Christians to give

⁸ Michelle Bayefsky, “Who Should Regulate Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis in the United States?” *AMA Journal of Ethics* 20, no. 12 (Dec. 2018), E1160-1167, <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/who-should-regulate-preimplantation-genetic-diagnosis-united-states/2018-12>.

⁹ Emma Waters, “Why the IVF Industry Must Be Regulated,” The Heritage Foundation, March 19, 2024, <https://www.heritage.org/life/report/why-the-ivf-industry-must-be-regulated>.

¹⁰ Craig Turczynski, “In Vitro Fertilization (IVF): A Comprehensive Primer” Charlotte Lozier Institute, last modified December 17, 2024, <https://lozierinstitute.org/in-vitro-fertilization-ivf-a-comprehensive-primer/>.

¹¹ Emma Waters, “Taming IVF’s Wild West,” *The New Atlantis*, no. 73 (Spring 2024), <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/taming-ivfs-wild-west>.

¹² S. Sunderam, et al., “Assisted Reproductive Technology Surveillance — United States, 2018” *MMWR Surveillance Summary* 71, no. 4 (February 2022): 1–19, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss7104a1>.

¹³ Sunderam, et al., “Assisted Reproductive Technology Surveillance — United States, 2018.”

¹⁴ Marie Hargreave, “Fertility Treatment and Childhood Cancer Risk” *JAMA Network Open* 5, no. 8 (August 2022), doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.30162, https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2795805#google_vignette.

¹⁵ European Society of Cardiology, “Babies born after fertility treatment have higher risk of heart defects,” last modified September 27, 2024, <https://www.escardio.org/The-ESC/Press-Office/Press-releases/babies-born-after-fertility-treatment-have-higher-risk-of-heart-defects#:~:text=27%20Sep%202024,babies%20born%20following%20assisted%20reproduction>.

¹⁶ Sheree L. Boulet, et al., “Assisted Reproductive Technology and Birth Defects Among Liveborn Infants in Florida, Massachusetts, and Michigan, 2000-2010” *JAMA Pediatrics* 160, no. 6 (July 2016), doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2015.4934, <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2506140>.

¹⁷ Christine Fountain, et al., “Association between assisted reproductive technology conception and autism in California, 1997-2007.” *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 5, (April 2015): 963–971. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2014.302383.

¹⁸ Oliver O’Donovan, *Begotten or Made?*, A New Edition for the 21st Century (Landrum, SC: Davenant Press, 2022), 100.

their embryos a chance at life.

Parents may either seek an adoptive family for their frozen embryos or implant the embryos themselves to give their children a chance at life. To indefinitely freeze one's embryos creates a snowball effect (as in the opening story of this essay) that ultimately affects one's entire family.

And while data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show an overall IVF success rate of twenty-four percent, these numbers rely on IVF cycles and live-born children, not on *total number* of embryos created. While studies vary, researchers estimate that only 2.3 percent¹⁹ to ten percent²⁰ of embryos created via IVF are ultimately live born. For embryos involved, then, the success rates are very low.

And the use of surrogates or donors doesn't do anything to mitigate IVF's risks. Rather, studies show that these third-party procedures cause children to incur additional

emotional and mental difficulties (similar to the difficulties suffered by children who are abandoned by a parent).²¹ For example, studies of donor-conceived children suggest high rates of anxiety, depression, uncertainty on their genetic makeup and heritage (This poses additional problems as questions of unknown siblings and romantic relationships arise).²²

THE "PACKAGE DEAL" OF MARRIAGE, SEX, AND PROCREATION

But beyond misunderstandings of infertility and of the moral issues embedded in "routine" IVF procedures, these reproductive technologies sever the Bible's "package deal" of marriage, sex, and procreation. While people have long borne children outside of marriage, IVF renders sex unnecessary for procreation. Hypothetically, with IVF, one could be married to one person, romantically involved with another, and having children with still another via IVF and third-party reproduction.

¹⁹ Waters, "Why the IVF Industry Must Be Regulated"

²⁰ Nicolás Garrido, et al., "Cumulative Live-Birth Rates per Total Number of Embryos Needed to Reach Newborn in Consecutive In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) Cycles: A New Approach to Measuring the Likelihood of IVF Success," *Fertility and Sterility* 96, no. 1 (May 2011): 40–46, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fertnstert.2011.05.008>.

²¹ We are Donor Conceived, "My Daddy's Name Is Donor," accessed March 15, 2025, <https://www.wereadonorconceived.com/uncategorized/my-daddys-name-is-donor/>.

²² Rennie Burke, et al., "How Do Individuals Who Were Conceived Through the Use of Donor Technologies Feel About the Nature of Their Conception?" *Harvard Medical School Center for Bioethics*, (April 2021), <https://bioethics.hms.harvard.edu/journal/donor-technology>.



IVF introduces the possibility of severing the unified and exclusive progression of marriage, sex, and procreation between one man and one woman (Gen 2:24), a principle articulated in Malachi 2:15, when the prophet says, “Did he not make them one [marriage], with a portion of the Spirit in their union [sex]? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring [procreation].”

As I argued elsewhere,

From Scripture alone, it seems clear that as additional degrees of separation are placed between each aspect of marriage, sex, and procreation, more opportunities for sin arise. What God has brought together in that “package deal,” let no human separate (Matthew 19:6). Infertility, miscarriage, and stillborn births introduced the experience of separation between these realities, and the pain of this unnatural loss is immense. Reproductive technologies such as hormonal contraception, Plan B, chemical abortion pills, and even IVF can similarly sever the natural relationship between marriage, sex, and procreation.²³

This doesn’t mean it’s a sin to use one of these technologies, but it’s important to recognize that they impose degrees of separation that either pause or circumvent the natural relationship between sex and procreation.

CONCLUSION

Believers should be animated to proclaim God’s good design for marriage, sex, and procreation, and the delight of children to a hurting world. And this heart of love and compassion should be displayed all the more when right desires for children are frustrated due to either nature (infertility) or sinful means (genetic selection). ✕

Emma Waters is a Policy Analyst in the Center for Technology and the Human Person at The Heritage Foundation.

²³ Emma Waters, “Opinion: IVF and the Package Deal of Marriage, Sex, and Procreation,” *Republic Sentinel*, March 11, 2024, <https://republicsentinel.com/articles/opinion-ivf-and-the-package-deal-of-marriage-sex-and-procreation>.



Parenting as Shepherding

I was riding through the Romanian countryside when my host pointed to a large flock of sheep. At the head of the flock was a shepherd who was driving several goats. Behind followed the flock of sheep. My host observed, “The shepherds are driving the goats and the sheep are following. You cannot drive sheep,” my host observed, “you must lead them. If you try to drive sheep, they will scatter.” Parents must lead their children like wise shepherds. Shepherding a child’s heart means guiding and nurturing a child’s emotional, spiritual, and moral development with care and compassion. Shepherding is attentive and loving, providing direction, encouragement, and discipline while fostering a deep, trusting relationship. Parents must nurture their children rather



than merely managing behavior. Here are some key elements of shepherding.

UNDERSTAND THE HEART

We tend to think of the heart as the seat of emotions. Phrases such as “have a heart” describe tenderness and understanding. But the Bible does not use the heart to describe emotions. In Scripture, the heart describes the central core of our being. The heart is the command center – the well-spring of life. In the words of Proverbs 4:23, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flows the springs of life.” All behavior is heart-driven. Our problem, and our children’s problem, is not just the ways we sin, but the sin that lies under the sin. It is the pride, compulsive self-centeredness, love of self, the envy and assorted sinful attitudes of heart that motivate behavior.

It is easy for parents to focus on behavior and miss the heart. If my focus is

controlling and constraining behavior, I will tend toward behaviorism — managing my child’s behavior by incentivizing behaviors I want, and disincentivizing those I do not want. In behaviorism, the concern is not necessarily the needs of my child; it is producing the outcomes I desire as a parent.

Jesus reminds us that activities such as coveting, deceit, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly flow from the heart (see Mark 7:22–23). Focusing on these behaviors without reference to the heart is like trying to solve the problem of weeds in the lawn with a lawn mower. The weeds cannot be eradicated without dealing with the roots beneath the soil.

Help your children identify the heart attitudes that lie under the ways they sin. Consider love of self rather than love for others, or pride rather than humility, or rebellion rather than submission, getting revenge rather than entrusting oneself to God, or fear of man rather than fear of God. This is only a suggestive list of possible attitudes of heart. Of course, understanding the attitudes of heart that lie beneath your own besetting sins will facilitate asking good questions to help your children understand their hearts. Engage in conversations that help your children uncover the heart issues that motivate behavior.

COMMUNICATION

Helping children understand the motives of the heart requires conversation. Your insight into the ways your heart strays from loving God and others provides insight needed to ask good questions of your children. Questions such as, “Help





me understand... what you were feeling... what you were hoping to achieve... what did you want... what idol of the heart were you serving..." will help your children understand their motivations. Shepherding your children instills habits of self-reflection and awareness about motivation.

These conversations necessitate strong relationships based on trust and open communication. Listen both to what is being said and to what is not being said. Cultivate listening without immediate judgment. Encourage your children to express their thoughts. Delight in understanding, not just airing your own opinion (Prov 18:2). The stronger the relationship, the more willing your children will be to take you into their confidence.

Model the attitudes of heart and the behaviors that you wish to instill. Be an example of the humility, grace, and hope of the gospel. Acknowledge your failures and seek forgiveness when you have sinned against your child. This can be a more powerful example of Christian vitality than if you had gotten it right to begin with.

GOSPEL-CENTERED

The gospel is central to all we do as shepherds of our children. We want them to understand how profoundly we all need the forgiveness, grace, and enablement of the gospel. Help them identify the ways they stray like lost sheep and how profoundly they need forgiveness and internal transformation. Immerse their thinking in the truth that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ (Rom 8:1). Use parables like the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) to show Jesus as a willing, powerful Savior who forgives repenting people. Help them see Jesus as the one through whom we can do all things (Phil 4:13). Remind them that all our temptations are common to mankind. God always provides a way out so that we may stand in the face of temptation (1 Cor 10:13). Our great high priest can sympathize with our weakness even as he provides grace and mercy for every time of need (Heb 4:14–16).

Addressing the heart, and not just behavior, opens the way for the gospel. If your goal is just behavior management, the gospel will not be the core of your interaction in correction or discipline. Instead, you will gravitate to incentives and disincentives to encourage behavioral outcomes. But if your goal is understanding the heart, the gospel is the only hope. Bring your children the hope of the gospel. Show them where to find the grace of forgiveness and empowerment that is found in Christ. If you are shepherding their hearts, the gospel is not just tangential — it is your only hope. Every opportunity to correct and discipline is an opportunity to bring the hope of the gospel.

DISCIPLINE

I have often been asked, “What about discipline? Surely we cannot just talk to children when they do wrong.” The fact that we are shepherding hearts does not mean we don’t discipline. It simply tells us how to discipline. The Scriptures remind us that discipline is an expression of love. It is what a father (or mother) does for his children because he loves them (Heb 12:5–11). There is a clear place for consequences. It is appropriate for parents to exercise the “sowing and reaping” principle of Scripture (Gal 6:4). Sometimes parents must shape consequences for wrong behavior. Even in those times the goal is not to punish, but to illustrate the truth that God has built consequences into his world. The goal of discipline is to disciple our children.

One of the most humbling aspects of parenting is the realization that you cannot save your children. God must do something in them that you are powerless to do. Your powerlessness as you seek to fulfill your calling to shepherd your children casts you on the power of the great shepherd of the sheep. He has modeled, in his love and sacrifice for you, your role as you shepherd the hearts of your children. “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus... that you might shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the words of life” (see Phil 2:5–16). ✕

Dr. Tedd Tripp is Pastor Emeritus at Grace Fellowship Church in Hazleton, PA, an author, and conference Speaker



How to Raise Adults

When it comes to raising children, what is the goal? Admitting there are many things we should accomplish, are they all equally important?

To get at this question, let's posit three bins representing the following categories: first-order, secondary, and, tertiary objectives. In this essay we'll just look at the first two, and whatever is left over can go in the last bin.

We could reasonably describe first-order objectives as "passing on the faith." If we fail here, we fail utterly. But I think it's a larger bin than generally believed, and it includes things often thrown into the second bin. (I'll explain why in a moment.)

FIRST-ORDER OBJECTIVES

By "passing on the faith," I think we can include knowledge of God, attendance upon divine worship and the ordinary means of grace, obeying God's law, pursuing holiness (e.g. developing habits of personal devotion such as Bible study, prayer, and even fasting), and finally, the catch-all, submitting to the Lordship of Christ in all things.

So far, so good. But is it mission accomplished if all the above describes junior, but he's still single and living in his mother's basement at 35? (Okay, that's low-hanging fruit; let's be more generous — is it mission accomplished if he's earning six figures, drives a BMW, has a nice condo, but still single at 35?)

While it might make you wince to give a

straight answer, be honest. Can you say this is ideal? Is junior in any position to pass the faith on to another generation by himself? Of course not.

Just last night, in a conversation with a high-end lawyer in my church (and when I say “high end,” I mean he’s on a first name basis with Supreme Court Justices) the subject of inheritance came up. He noted that we’ve downgraded the practice to mean passing on fungible assets, in other words, what can be converted to cash. An older view often included the care of assets received by inheritance, with the goal of someday passing them onto yet another generation. Examples would include the family farm or a business. When you inherit those things, you’re also inheriting a family calling — and liquidating them would in some sense be a tragedy, even if there were no other choice.

If this is the way we understand passing on the faith, it would call for turning secondary matters into first order ones. And when it comes to raising boys and girls, it would also mean our respective callings as men and women would take on a first-order significance.

SECOND-ORDER OBJECTIVES, REALLY?

So, Junior needs to grow up, but what does that look like? I think we can compile a list of virtues for young men that would have to include (at least) the following: a sense of his vocation, habits conducive to success — especially prudential judgment, financial management skills, and even physical exercise — but at the very top, right next to and connected to his calling, qualities that would help him win a wife and live harmoniously with her while leading a household. (A



somewhat different, though complementary list could be made for daughters.)

I think that there are inhibitors to seeing things this way, one theological and another cultural.

First, when it comes to first-order objectives, at least in the Reformed tradition, we think in terms of “law and gospel,” law being what is nonnegotiable and required of everyone, and gospel, what God has done (and promised to do) in order to save us because we invariably fail to obey the law perfectly.

But law and gospel don’t exhaust the Scriptures. There’s another category, and we tend to overlook it because we think it’s optional, even adiaphora. What I’m thinking of is wisdom. And while you should be a fool for Christ, does that mean being a fool more generally is indifferent?

“ADULTING”

Broadly speaking many young people believe they’re ill-equipped to live as adults, and as a result they’ve turned a noun into a verb to describe their sense of faking it. They call it “adulting.” I first learned

about this from an editorial in the *New York Post* entitled, “Adulting’ classes prove millennials’ nitwit parents are to blame,” by Kyle Smith.¹ It begins:

For a few years now, evidence has been accumulating that millennials contain within themselves a weird combination of grandiosity and an inability to leave the house — they’re self-absorbed and global thinking, smug and terrified.

I wish this didn’t describe some kids from Christian homes, but it sometimes does — even kids who’ve been classically educated, or homeschooled. Sometimes those kids even have the “change the world for Jesus” bug, but they struggle to remain gainfully employed. Sometimes they lack the basic aptitudes employers expect, like showing up for work on time. Other times they’re just plain soft, too sensitive to receive direct criticism, or they wilt under pressure. Entrepreneurs I know tell me they won’t hire kids from Christian families without vetting them first. They’d like to hire more, but they’ve gotten cautious because they’ve been disappointed too often.

I think the reason we’re not raising adults is because we’re not trying to. Instead, we want our kids to be happy, and when it comes to that we defer to them. “Do what makes you happy,” the belief being that happiness is subjective and no one can get it wrong.

But this definition of happiness doesn’t comport with Aristotle. (He believed you *could* get it wrong). It isn’t even what

Thomas Jefferson had in mind when he penned the *Declaration of Independence*. It has more in common with Oprah Winfrey than either of those men. The classical understanding made happiness a byproduct of virtue, which implies only virtuous people are truly happy. Since that takes us halfway to the goal, let’s go full-Aristotle and single out a virtue for consideration. The virtue I’m thinking of is duty.

In principle, most people are not against someone doing his duty, so long as it makes him happy. And that’s the problem. Even the Christian faith can be framed this way, and it is often sold this way.

PIETY AND DUTY

Getting kids to grow up requires flipping the order of happiness and duty. Duty must come first, and happiness must find a way to follow. While this might be a hard-sell in some settings, I suspect that young people are more open to it than we might expect.

And recovering this older approach will take us back to an older understanding of piety. In the old view, piety was a social virtue, not something that took you out of circulation. Today, if the word is used at all, it brings old ladies and worn family Bibles to mind. But in antiquity, it was gratitude for your benefactors. “*Pius*” — the Latin word ours is based on — consisted in paying your debts.

But it didn’t end with feelings of gratitude. Feeling grateful wasn’t even necessary. Instead, making a return of some sort was. And this could mean anything from car-

¹ Kyle Smith, “Adulting’ classes prove millennials’ nitwit parents are to blame,” *New York Post*, March 17, 2017, <https://nypost.com/2017/03/17/helpless-millennials-are-seriously-taking-adulting-classes/> (accessed March 19, 2025).



ing for aged parents, to offering sacrifices to the gods. It could even mean having children so that your ancestors would not be forgotten, and the supply of worshippers serving the gods continued to grow.

In the first century, the personification of piety was the Trojan hero Aeneas, so much so his appellation was, “Pius Aeneas.” The image used to convey his piety was that of him with his crippled father on his back, leading his son with one hand, and holding a sword in the other as he fought his way out of Troy as it burned down around them.

Would we describe this as a happy moment? It doesn’t matter; he was a grown man shouldering his responsibilities.

In antiquity, piety looked different for men and women because performing your duty had a lot to do with your sex and practically nothing to do with your desires. Aeneas was depicted on coins as an image of masculine piety, while other coins depicting a woman with a baby to her breast was an image of feminine piety.

On both coins the inscription read, “*pius.*”

Returning to the distinction between first- and second-order priorities, are you beginning to see how they can — and even should — overlap? Beginning a household of your own cannot be reduced to a formula for happiness. And it isn’t something you can opt out of on a whim. Instead, we need to recover the obligatory character of forming new households. While there are circumstances and conditions that can justify opting out, they’re exceptional, they’re not the norm. The norm is passing on the faith to the next generation. And it includes raising sons to become fathers, and daughters to become mothers, and, of course, this means marriage, and living as husbands and wives. ✕

*C. R. Wiley is a Presbyterian minister. He is also a Senior Editor of Touchstone Magazine and has served as the Vice President of the Academy of Philosophy and Letters. He’s written a number of books, perhaps the best known is, *The Household and the War for the Cosmos*. He’s a commercial real estate investor and was a professor of philosophy for a decade. He’s been married 40 years, has three grown children who are all married and have children of their own. He also has 6 grandchildren and counting.*

Biblical Roles in Parenting: Help from the Puritans

There may be no better example of the Reformation in action than in the home life of the Puritans, who masterfully applied God's Word to every area of life and developed a biblical, positive, and lavish perspective on the family that has been hardly paralleled in church history.¹ As J. I. Packer (1926–2020) observed, the Puritans were “the creators of the English Christian marriage, the English Christian family, and the English Christian home.”² The Puritans recognized that holiness begins at home and then extends to all of life. As experts in combining experiential piety, rigorous biblical exegesis, and a comprehensive Christian worldview into a coherent whole, the Puritans bequeathed to the church a warm, practical, and doxological vision for family life (and indeed for *all* of life).

“The Puritans recognized that holiness begins at home and then extends to all of life”

¹This chapter is adapted from Joel R. Beeke, “The Puritan Family,” in *Living for God's Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism* (Orlando, Fla.: Reformation Trust, 2008), 333–348; and Joel R. Beeke, “Help from Our Puritan Forebears,” in *Parenting by God's Promises: How to Raise Children in the Covenant of Grace* (Orlando, Fla.: Reformation Trust, 2011), 169–179. Used with permission.

²J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1990), 260.

The Puritan view on the distinct roles of husbands and wives in parenting is instructive for us today. For the Puritans, the basis for the relationship between husband and wife in fulfilling their parental duties is the loving authority of the husband and the loving submission of the wife. The Puritans taught that the headship of husbands over wives and parents over children is a biblical principle (Eph 5:22–24; 6:1–3). This means that husbands and fathers must exercise spiritual, social, and educational leadership on behalf of their wives and children. They must also provide adequate financial support for them. Although a wife must submit to her husband’s authority (Eph 5:22; Col 3:18; 1 Pet 3:1–6), the husband’s hierarchical leadership in the home does not mean that his wife is his servant (Eph 5:25; Col 3:19; 1 Pet 3:7).

Furthermore, the Puritans taught that God has ordained distinct spheres of responsibility in the family. Although the husband is the head of the home, the husband and wife share authority for the daily oversight of the family.³ Thus, the Puritans believed that it was appropriate for the father to delegate authority in various domestic spheres to his wife in areas where she was more skilled than he.

For the Puritans, the foundation of biblical childrearing is the principle of love (Titus 2:4),⁴ while the overarching duty of parents to their children is to provide for them in all things (both temporal and spiritual) and at all times — from infancy to adulthood.⁵ We will examine several ways in which the Puritans taught

that husbands and wives have distinct and complementary roles in raising their children from conception to adulthood.

First, *the Puritans taught the roles of husbands and wives before the birth of their children*. The Puritans believed that childrearing begins at conception. Before a child was born, they taught, the new parents had two major responsibilities before God. First, they were to pray for the health, safety, and salvation of their unborn child every day. Second, they were to protect the health of the child by protecting the health of the mother. Because they placed great value on children (Ps 127:3–5), Puritan parents sought to secure the best conditions for the birth of a healthy child. Puritan husbands were expected to tenderly care for their wives during pregnancy and childbirth, to ease their burdens at home, and to shield them from anything that could be dangerous to the health of mother or child. Pregnant mothers were advised against activities that could harm the baby, such as running or riding on horseback. They were to watch their diets carefully, avoiding food that could be harmful to the baby and restraining themselves from eating either too much or too little.

Second, *the Puritans taught the roles of husbands and wives during the infancy of their children*. They stressed the centrality of the mother’s role in caring for newborns. They also encouraged breastfeeding, not only because it offers the best nutrition for the child, but also because it helps strengthen the bond between mother and child. William Gouge (1575–1653) dedicated eleven pages of his *Domesticall Duties* to explain-

³ See Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 77–78.

⁴ William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (London: printed by John Haviland for William Bladen, 1622), 498.

⁵ Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, 505.

“The Puritans believed that the whole Bible was necessary to make a whole Christian”

ing why it is important for a mother to breastfeed (instead of hiring a nurse), answering twelve objections along the way.⁶ Fathers should help care for the needs of their newborn children whenever possible, the Puritans taught. Such tender care strengthens the bonds between mother and child, father and child, and husband and wife. Thus, in their labors together, husband and wife made a united effort to love and protect their baby.

Third, *the Puritans taught the roles of husbands and wives in the education of their children.* The Puritans provided practical guidance on how parents can bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph 6:4). The chief aims of Puritan education were salvation from sin and training in godliness. To help parents train their children in the truths of Scripture, Puritan pastors wrote catechisms — small books that explain fundamental Christian doctrines by means of question-and-answer, bolstered with Scripture proofs.

The Puritans catechized their children as soon as possible. Most Puritan fathers catechized each of their children for about one hour per week. Fathers explained the catechism with illustrations, Bible stories, and simple conversations with their children. The Puritans taught that the educa-

tion of children was the primary responsibility of fathers. However, they believed that it was the task of both parents, and therefore it was appropriate for the father to delegate much of the authority in educating the children to his wife.

Fourth, *the Puritans taught the roles of husbands and wives in family worship with their children.* The Puritans taught that family worship is the most powerful means of childrearing. They considered family worship to be both a privilege and an obligation. Puritan families gathered for family worship once or twice every day. Sessions usually lasted from fifteen to thirty minutes, depending on the age of the children and the gifts of the father.

During family worship, the father led the family in prayer and reading Scripture. He usually read a Scripture portion for the day, systematically reading through the Bible from cover to cover. The Puritans believed that the whole Bible was necessary to make a whole Christian. In teaching, they used the catechetical method of asking and answering questions. The father asked questions of the children, both to generate conversation and to keep the children involved. The family then sang psalms, and the father took time to ask and answer questions about biblical truths. The Pu-

⁶ Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, 508–518.

ritans said that a father should be pure in doctrine, relevant in application, and affectionate in manner during family worship.

Fifth, *the Puritans taught the roles of husbands and wives in disciplining their children*. The Puritans taught that in the training of children, the rod and reproof used together give wisdom (Prov 29:15). The Puritans said that if a child is disobedient, a parent should first give a verbal reproof. The parent should explain how the child has committed a sin against another person and against God (Ps 51:4), then stress the need for the child to repent. If verbal reproof is ineffective, a parent should use the rod — a term for the use of corporal punishment such as spanking. When disciplining children, Puritans labored for a balance between strictness and leniency. On one hand, a child's natural bent for evil must be broken. On the other hand, a parent should not break a child's spirit. Discipline must be fair and temperate. It should also be tailored to the unique needs and personalities of each child. Much of the method of discipline depends on the child's age, attitude, response, and temperament. When corporal discipline is necessary, it must be done with love, compassion, prayer, and self-control, while it should be measured, age appropriate, and commensurate with the offense.⁷ Corporal discipline must never be too severe — for small faults, for childishness, to very young children, with excessive frequency, or to the point of physical harm or injury.⁸

Sixth and finally, *the Puritans taught the roles of husbands and wives in counseling their children*. The Puritans wrote that par-

ents are responsible to help their children make major life decisions — especially regarding the choice of a suitable vocation and a godly spouse. Puritan pastors advised parents and children to avoid two extremes in making life choices. First, parents should not force their children into occupations or marriages without their consent. Second, children were advised not to disregard their parents' advice simply because they did not initially like it. Rather, children were to seriously and prayerfully contemplate their parents' counsel. An obedient child might eventually choose to go another way, but only after he or she had prayed long and hard about his or her course. Then the child would respectfully tell the parents about the decision.

As they fulfilled their distinct and complementary roles in childrearing, Puritan parents were thoroughly involved in the lives of their children — from conception and birth through childhood and youth, and on into marriage and beyond. In every area, their task was to apply the truth of God's Word to their families, leading their children to God, instructing and encouraging them to do his will, and waiting on God for his promised blessing. In our day of ungodliness and family breakdown, may God help us appreciate and recover the vision of the Puritans for childrearing as we seek to walk in the fear of God with our own families. ✕

Dr. Joel R. Beeke (Ph.D., Westminster Seminary) is chancellor and professor of homiletics and systematic and practical theology at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, a pastor of the Heritage Reformed Congregation in Grand Rapids, Michigan, editor of Puritan Reformed Journal and Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth, board chairman of Reformation Heritage Books, a frequent speaker at Reformed conferences around the world, and a prolific author.

⁷ Gouge, *Of Domestic Duties*, 555–557.

⁸ Gouge, *Of Domestic Duties*, 558.

Critical Race Theory, Toxic in the Home

Last year, I took a closer look at Critical Race Theory (CRT), and it struck me that CRT is more accurately construed as VRS — Vandalizing, Racialist, Stipulation — *stipulation* instead of theory since it simply imposes an arbitrary, cranky grid, indeed a vicious mindset, over the social world; *racialist*, or more nearly racist, since it obsesses over genetics and pigment, valorizing persons of color and demonizing whites; and *vandalizing*, since it traffics not in thoughtful criticizing, but rather in defacing and gutting Judeo-Christian, Western culture.

It despises the civilizing work of the traditional, nuclear family, and the civilization it produces and nourishes. When bloody, revolutionary Marxism took hold of Russia but faltered in Germany and Italy, Anto-

nio Gramsci retooled, promoting “cultural Marxism,” whereby class resentment could be insinuated into the various sectors of society to accomplish what Herbert Marcuse called “the long march through the institutions.” And what better institution to infect than the very first one, the family, which predates academia, the military, the arts, commerce, and human government.





Critical theory is an anti-biblical fraud, which seeks to dignify what the Scripture condemns — covetousness, resentment, slander, bitterness, and pride, marshalling them to bring down much that is innocent. Instead of following Paul’s instruction in Philippians 4 to dwell on things that are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, and of good report (such as a healthy Christian family), it schemes to exalt the bogus and noxious. It’s an ideology that divides the world into underserving haves and abused have-nots, the former ensconced as tyrants through systemic treacheries which must be exposed and smashed.

It lacks what Karl Popper called “falsifiability.” In the end, nothing can count against it. As with Darwinian evolution, proponents will always find ways to ad-

just their conceit, adding another gazillion years to the story, hatching another “just-so story,” insulting the skeptics as knuckle-draggers, claiming that they themselves are the fountainhead of pure science, and so on. Of course, they’re desperate to do so. Like the old fellow with the worn out, backfiring jalopy, they stick with it since it’s their only ride.

To be sure, there are great wrongs in this world, evils that cry out for redress. Read Amos and see how a prophet announces God’s judgment on all sorts of corruption and nastiness. The New Testament picks up the grim indictment to include those guilty of social sins, such as murder, extortion, and lying (as in fraud and slander). Against these, God provides governmental “avengers to execute [his] wrath” (Rom 13:1–7). And, so,

we have a Department of Justice assigned to root out and attack injustice, with specificity, plausibility, and even-handedness (at least, ideally so). But CRT traffics in free ranging and surly defamation in support of vaporous indictments of whole classes of people.

CRT, "THE CAUSE AND SOLUTION"

In an episode of *The Simpsons*, Homer offers up a toast, "To alcohol! The cause of, and solution to, all of life's problems." I find an analogue in CRT: "We raise our glasses to blaming others for our plight! The cause of and answer to our situation." (Of course, this isn't just a race thing. It applies across the board to all of us who palliate ourselves by assigning culpability to others.) In 2023, newly-elected Chicago mayor Brandon Johnson defended the hundreds of black teens who came downtown for destructive rioting, saying that it wasn't "constructive to demonize youth who have otherwise been starved of opportunities in their own communities." Classic deflection.

Yes, the black community's plight is real. In the summer of 2011, when I moved from Chicago back to Nashville, I read that the illegitimacy rate for black kids in Cook County stood at 79 percent (as compared to roughly 30 percent for Anglos and Hispanics). Several years later, when I led a seminary mission team to Detroit, I learned that the city had an 85 percent rate. As President Obama said in a rare moment of insight and candor, fatherhood was both important and declining among the people with whom he most closely identified. In a 2008 address to a Chicago church, he said,

But if we are honest with ourselves, we'll admit that too many fathers are missing — missing from too many

lives and too many homes. They have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundations of our families are weaker because of it.

You and I know how true this is in the African-American community. We know that more than half of all black children live in single-parent households, a number that has doubled — doubled — since we were children. We know the statistics — that children who grow up without a father are five times more likely to live in poverty and commit crime; nine times more likely to drop out of schools and twenty times more likely to end up in prison. They are more likely to have behavioral problems, or run away from home or become teenage parents themselves. And the foundations of our community are weaker because of it.

And so we hear, "Wait! Are you saying we messed up, that we're somehow to blame for these pathologies?" Better to take Mayor Johnson's route and find someone else to stigmatize. Well, yes, Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" incentivized single-motherhood, with the promise of AFDC (Aid for Dependent Children) checks. But that doesn't say much for parents who put income above sexual and familial decency. Well, let's try this: We're told that ante-bellum disregard for black family integrity established patterns of brokenness. But weren't black marriages stronger a hundred years ago, when slavery was a far more recent phenomenon?

Whatever! We all know that the guilty parties (or The Guilty Party) can be found elsewhere, what with their systemic wickedness.

Oh, and don't forget to install an insulating roll of "standpoint epistemology": "You have no right to judge if you haven't experienced my troubles." This is the sort of thing abortion enthusiasts deploy to discount the counsel of men, a rhetorical "King's X."

MY FOLKS DIDN'T PLAY

By the grace of God, I found myself in a family which refused to gripe, though, on the CRT model, there were some grounds for petulance. But we were white — how is this possible?

Some background: My mother, Agnes, was born into a privileged home. Her father founded the Detroit Economic Club, and she was a class officer at the University of Michigan. Among other blessings, she enjoyed equestrian training as a young girl. Her brother went to Harvard and became a vice-president of J. L. Hudson's, the Macy's of Detroit. On the other hand, my father was born into a home which would soon be broken. His father worked for a lumber company in the "hollers" of East Tennessee. His family lived in a shack that was carried up into the hills by a flatbed railcar and, by means of a cable, was set off on the siding. (My dad remembers playing, as a small child, with the lift-ring in the middle of the floor.) When his parents' marriage broke up, his mom took the kids to Atlanta, where, in high school, my dad earned some money as a messenger boy in a train yard, dodging engines as he hustled notes from one engineer to another.

To make a long story short, he met my mother when, as a Naval chaplain in WWII, he was assigned to the Ford Motor Company Naval works in Dearborn, Michigan. Within several months, he

would ship out for the Pacific, and they were married just before he did so. Her father was so disgusted that she'd thrown her life away with this wedding that he refused to attend it, and she soon departed for the South, where she took a job as dean of women at a little Christian college.

After the war, my dad used his G. I. Bill to earn a doctorate in church history at the University of Edinburgh, and he landed jobs teaching religion at a series of Southern Baptist-related colleges — Cumberland, Carson-Newman, Belmont, and Ouachita. Pay was lean, and supply preaching was a life-saver. Sometimes they paid him in produce or chickens, and I recall one bird running around the yard with his head cut off and my mom's gutting and plucking it for a meal.

And then there were the cars. Coming from a poor family, dad had to learn some auto mechanics, and this came in handy when, in the 1950s, he bought a broken down, hump-backed, WWII-era car from a destitute student for \$50 and then fixed it up to drive us around town in the midst of the low-slung, jet-finned cars of the day. On trips to his mom in Florida, we'd stay in tourist homes with no TV's and with bare light bulbs suspended by cords from the ceiling. We couldn't afford ice cream, so mom served us some sort of vegetable oil substitute called Mellorine.

Finances were a challenge, but never once did I hear my mom complain about their circumstances. It was all thumbs-up and thank-the-Lord for what we had. No longing for the riches of Michigan, no lamenting missed opportunities to marry affluent classmates. We simply had no idea that, one day, the habit of muttering,

“We simply had no idea that, one day, the habit of muttering, griping, and recriminating (or the celebration thereof) would become stock in trade for the culture.”

griping, and recriminating (or the celebration thereof) would become stock in trade for the culture.

And then there was race. Looking back through my mom’s high school yearbooks from the 1930s, I saw black students in her Highland Park High School class. And now she was in the Jim Crow South, with its Dixiecrat segregation. And yes, our downtown, county-seat church was segregated, as were my public schools. My father’s childhood was in East Tennessee, where secession from the Union was opposed two-to-one. Both parents were pulling for the integrationists, with Winthrop Rockefeller elected in 1966 as the first Republican governor since Reconstruction.

That being said, I never heard my parents say a harsh word about the segregationists in our town and church (and they were there too). I recall the day that a wonderful man from Nigeria, the headmaster of a school established by our missionaries, came to our college and sought member-

ship in our church, just a few blocks from the school. It created quite a stir, with six hundred people showing up for the big, Sunday morning vote. Though the long-time teacher of a men’s Sunday School class spoke against it, the vote went two to one in favor of admittance. The richest lady in the church, the one who’d just bought new robes for the choir, left in anger. Of course, we Coppengers were delighted with the tally. After all, we’d been singing “Red, and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight” throughout our childhood, and we’d been sending missionaries and funding to Nigeria throughout the years. How in the world could an old pillar of the church argue that the man would “be happier with his people on the west side of town”?

It was an honor to have the Nigerian over for meals in our home, and I enjoyed playing tennis with him. In this vein, Mom worked with black congregations in our town, enlisting help for the establishment of a charitable “Christmas store,” providing toys for disadvantaged kids. There was no doubt where my parents’ racial sympathies lie, but never was heard an unkind word toward those who did not share in them. And I’m confident that, had I been critical of segregationist townfolk, I would have been rebuked. We didn’t do race-resentment in our house.

This fact came home to me recently when I was watching Jimmy Carter’s memorial service in the National Cathedral. In a eulogy, Andrew Young said that the president was “something of a miracle,” a product of the Deep South who could relate genuinely and effectively to all sorts of people:

I knew Plains from my pastorate in Thomasville, Georgia, about sixty,

seventy miles south of there. And I was even nervous driving through Plains. And Plains and Sumter County gave us one of the meanest experiences that we had in the Civil Rights Movement. So much so that Martin Luther King said that the sheriff of Plains in Sumter County, he really thought was the meanest man in the world.

And when I first met Jimmy Carter running for governor and said, 'The only thing I know about Plains and Sumter County is Fred Chapel!' And he said, 'Oh yes, he's one of my good friends!' And that was the last thing I wanted to hear. And yet, time and time again, I saw in him the ability to achieve greatness by the diversity of his personality and his upbringing.

THE FAMILY HEALTH CLINIC


The cultural forces arrayed against such a color-blind spirit are daunting. We live in a fever swamp of resentment and victimhood narratives, and it's natural to be infected with various strains of racialism. I've been struck by how publishers, both secular and Christian, have gone whole hog into spreading the infection of surliness. In the last two months, I've made trips to New York and Portland, and found myself at two massive, legendary bookstores, the Strand and Powell's. In both, I found double, floor-to-ceiling shelves, bearing hundreds of black-grievance works. For every Thomas Sowell, John McWhorter, or Shelby Steele volume, you'd find scores in the Ibram X. Kendi, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Michael Dyson genre.

Of course, the same emphasis predominates in the academy, broadcast media, and

wherever cultural elites take charge. I recall my first visit to the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. Both the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 and the glories of Oprah Winfrey (perhaps with her patronage) enjoyed substantial displays. But there was no mention of the inspiring story and signal judicial work of conservative justice Clarence Thomas. The normal citizen is left to walk around in a fog of ideological racialism.

So, what's the answer? I'd suggest another analogy. Through the years, I've found myself on several mission trips requiring a battery of shots and pills to keep us going, including guards against dengue and yellow fevers as well as malaria when we headed into the Amazon region of Brazil (turns out, I'd have profited from a dose of gamma globulin, which would have protected me from hepatitis A, which I caught from some unclean snacks offered up by well-meaning villagers). Similar medications prepared me for service in Sudan, the upper Nile region of Egypt, and remote Indonesia.

So let's think of the Christian family as the clinic where we get our spiritual vaccinations, inoculations, medications, and health advisories, to prepare us for dealing with the spiritual infections of the world. If the home is marinated in CRT passions, the kids are vulnerable to the formal and informal indoctrinations of a culture awash in peevish race obsession. Its instruments are dirty, its medicines contaminated or degraded.

And, so, the epidemic rages. 

Mark Coppenger is Retired Professor of Christian Philosophy and Ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

KYLE CLAUNCH AND MICHAEL CARLINO

The Necessity of a Male Savior



A Dogmatic Account of Gender Essentialism

In this essay, we seek to provide a clear and robust dogmatic foundation for a distinctly Christian anthropology, one that coheres with critical covenantal distinctions and pressing Christological concerns.¹ We are convinced a lack thereof is plaguing the discourse on this matter in broader Protestant and Evangelical circles. Our thesis is that the classic distinction between essence and existence is the best conceptual tool for articulating an account of gender essentialism for the following three reasons. First this framework is particularly suited to demonstrate the equality of men and wom-

en as sharers of the same essence. Secondly, it allows us to demonstrate that only men are called by God to be covenant heads, as maleness is a precondition to serve in this capacity. Finally, this account of gender essentialism lays a firm dogmatic foundation for upholding the fittingness and necessity of the Son of God's assumption of humanity as a male for us and our salvation.

GETTING GENDER ESSENTIALISM RIGHT

To begin, it is necessary to give some account of gender essentialism.² We are

¹ Editor's note: this article is an abstract of an essay published in the previous edition of *Eikon*: Kyle Claunch and Michael Carlino, "Gender Essentialism in Anthropological, Covenantal, and Christological Perspective," *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 6.2 (Fall 2024): 20-71.

² In this essay, we are intentionally avoiding the vast body of literature on gender theory and different ways to account for gender essentialism. Our aim is to give a positive account of gender as essential to humanity on the basis of biblical teaching and the use of classic conceptual terms. We will leave it to others to sort out where this proposal fits among the categories of gender essentialist proposals. For a survey of different types of gender essentialism, see Jordan Steffaniak, "Saving Masculinity and Femininity from the Morgue: A Defense of Gender Essentialism" *Southeastern Theological Review*, 12.1 (Spring, 2021): 15-35.

convinced that a sexual binary of male/female is *essential* to being human. As such, every individual human person is either male or female. We believe this to be the clear teaching of holy Scripture.

Exegetical Observations: Genesis 1

In the Genesis account of creation, God makes each living thing “according to its kind” (Gen 1:11, 21, 24). Each animal kind created consists of a reproducing pair of male and female. When God creates the sea-dwelling creatures and the birds of the sky “according to their kinds” on the fifth day, we read, “And God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth’” (1:22). When God creates *mankind* in his image on the sixth day, he makes them “male and female” and says to them, “Be fruitful and multiply” (1:28).

Two observations are important for our purposes. First, living things can be categorized into types that are broader than and inclusive of individual existing creatures. This is clear from the fact that different kinds of things are created, each kind including at least two individuals from the first moment of their creation. Thus, the biblical creation account demands our affirmation of what later thinkers would refer to as universal natures, or essences, as distinguished from individual instances, or existing things. There is a kind of thing, the properties of which necessarily characterize the individual instances of the kind. If each living being is created “according to its kind,” then the kind functions as a pattern according to which the existing thing is fashioned by God.

Second, *being gendered as either male or*



female is a necessary property of the kind of living beings identified on days four through six of creation week. It is clear that male and female individuals in a reproducing pair belong to the same kind, since having been created according to their kinds, they are “fruitful and multiply.” This is made most explicit in the account of the creation of *mankind*: “He created them male and female” (Gen 1:27). Both the male and the female are clearly identified as *mankind* in the previous verse (v. 26). We must, therefore, include the idea of gender in our conception of what constitutes the universal kind.

Stating this coherently requires some careful thought. Neither maleness nor femaleness, as such, can be identified as a necessary property of the kind. Otherwise, the other gender/sex would be excluded, and the reproducing pair would not be of the same kind. The male would be his own kind and the female her own kind, which is not what the text of Genesis 1 indicates is the case. It seems the only coherent way forward is to recognize that *being gendered as either male or female* is a necessary property of the kinds of living beings identified on days four through six of the creation week. This is what we mean when we say that a gender binary of male/female is *essential* to being human.



Dogmatic Elaboration: Essence, Existence, and Gender Essentialism

The notion that things exist according to the common properties of a universal kind, and that the properties of one kind differentiate it from another kind, has been recognized by philosophers throughout human intellectual history, even traditions whose key thinkers may have known nothing of the text of Genesis or the rest of Scripture. Christian theologians throughout history have been the beneficiaries of the precise categories and terms of philosophical reflection in their articulation of this biblically revealed truth. Seeking to glean the best insights from his own philosophical heritage, Thomas Aquinas articulated a precise distinction between *essence* and *existence*.³ This essence-existence distinction became a mainstay in Christian theological reflection for centuries to come and can rightly be identified

as classical for its frequent appearance in the late medieval period and throughout the periods of post-Reformation Protestant Orthodoxy.⁴ We find this distinction to provide precise conceptual terminology to articulate biblically revealed judgments concerning humanity and gender.⁵

Essence, as we deploy the term here, corresponds closely (if not exactly) with the understanding of *kind* suggested above in our analysis of the Genesis account. Essence is an abstract notion of common properties by which a being is *what* it is. Existence, on the other hand, is the individual instantiation of essence. Aquinas develops this key distinction most fully in his doctrine of God, especially the article on divine simplicity.⁶ All created things are composed of essence plus existence. God, on the other hand, being the first efficient cause of all things (creation *ex nihilo*), is not composite in any way and is, therefore, not composed

³ Thomas Joseph White says of this Thomistic distinction, "[It is] the central article in Aquinas's treatment of divine simplicity.... It addresses what he takes to be the most fundamental type of composition in created beings, more profound and universal than the form-matter distinction." White goes on to note that the essence-existence distinction is "one of [Aquinas's] more original philosophical contributions to the history of human thought." See Thomas Joseph White, *The Trinity: On the Nature and Mystery of the One God*, Vol. 19 of Thomistic Ressourcement Series (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 249.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas's understanding of essence and existence is taken up by many of the leading thinkers among the post-Reformation Reformed Orthodox. For definitions of these terms as they are put to use by the Reformed Orthodox, see Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017). Muller's entries for *essentia*, *esse*, and *essentialis dei* summarize the common understanding of the Reformed Orthodox on this matter.

⁵ For the distinction between conceptual terminology and judgments, see David Yeago, "The New Testament and Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis" *Pro Ecclesia*, 3.2 (1994): 152-164. For a more robust engagement with Thomas Aquinas on the essence-existence distinction, see our earlier essay, "Gender Essentialism in Anthropological, Covenantal, and Christological Perspective."

⁶ See especially *ST I*, Q.3, A.3-5.

of essence plus existence. God's essence is identical to his existence.⁷ While we heartily affirm this account of divine simplicity, including the denial of a distinction between essence and existence in God, the focus of our essay is on the doctrine of humanity where this distinction is very real.

All existing humans are the same with respect to essence, so they can only be distinguished in terms of their individual existence. Distinction between individuals of the same essence can be accounted for in two ways. First, all individuals are distinguished by the particularity of their essential properties. Take rationality, for example. All humans are rational beings, as rationality is an essential property of humanity. But this co-authored essay is written by Kyle and Michael, two males with two distinct rationalities. No matter how much one of us may wish to have the other's mind, it remains the case that we have our own mind and no one else's. Thus, we share the essential property of rationality while each possessing our own rational mind. The relation of rationality to this or that rationality is ultimately the same as the relation between essence and existence. The second way that beings of the same essence are distinguished is by their *accidental properties*. While essential properties name those characteristics that are necessary to being a particular kind of thing, accidents are the properties by which an existing being can change while remaining the same kind of thing. The accidental properties of

“...gender is an essential property of humanity.”

one existing individual differentiate it in a great variety of ways from other individuals of the same kind. Such properties as size, strength, location, relations, etc. can all change without a change in essence, and all serve to differentiate one existing being from others of the same kind.⁸

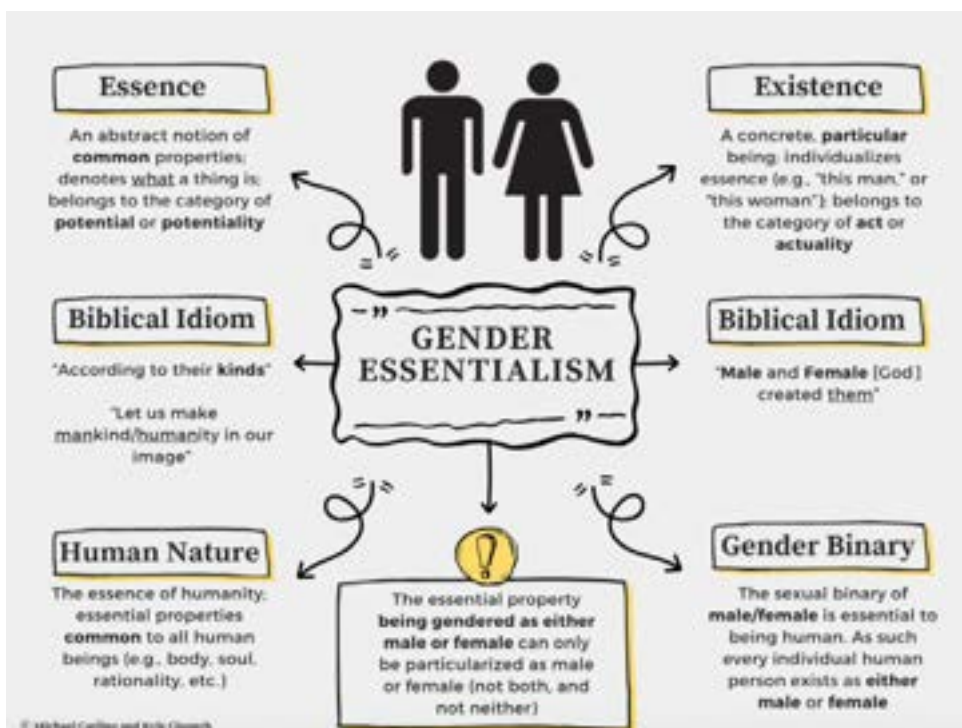
Gender as Essential, Not Accidental

How exactly does the issue of gender map onto this discussion? Some might be inclined to say that the particularity of maleness and femaleness represents a distinction of accidental properties. This would suggest that gender is something that admits degrees or may change without altering the essence of the being. We believe identifying gender as an accidental property would be a fatal flaw because of the way the biblical creation account includes both male and female in the kinds of beings that reproduce in the world, a fact made most clear with respect to the creation of mankind, as argued above.

Recall, however, that there is another, more fundamental way that existing beings of the same essence can differ — particularization

⁷ Anyone familiar with the basics of Thomistic metaphysics will recognize that essence belongs to the category of potential while existence belongs to the category of actuality. Negating the distinction between essence and existence in God is crucial to Thomas's notion that God is pure actuality (*actus purus*). Maintaining the distinction between essence and existence for all created things is crucial to the notion that God is utterly unique, in part because only he is pure act. All created beings are a composite of potential and actuality, just as they are a composite of essence plus existence.

⁸ Thomas explains that a man can be distinguished from another man of the same essence by way of “individual matter,” which he illustrates as “this particular flesh, these bones” or by “individualizing accidents,” which he illustrates as “this blackness or whiteness.” See *ST I*, Q.3, A.3, *Respondeo*.



of essential properties. Because of the strictures of the Genesis 1 account of creation, we contend that being either man or woman is a case of the particularization of an essential property. The essential property *being gendered as either male or female* can only be particularized as male or female (not both, and not neither). In saying all this, we are contending that gender is an essential property of humanity. This is what we mean by our affirmation of gender essentialism.

Scripture depicts the ontology of created things in a way that corresponds to the classical distinction between essence and existence. In the next section, we take up the important theological issue of covenant headship as it relates to gendered humanity, specifically as this corresponds with the maleness of Adam and Christ as the federal representatives of the Covenant of Works (CoW) and Covenant of Grace (CoG) respectively.

THE FITTINGNESS OF MALE HEADSHIP IN THE COVENANT OF WORKS AND THE COVENANT OF GRACE

The essence-existence distinction from the previous section is both assumed and confirmed in God's covenantal dealings with humanity in Scripture. We maintain that the Bible teaches male and female equally share in their status as image bearers according to human essence (Gen 1:26–28); and it is only men who are properly and fittingly covenant heads, not women (Gen 2:7; 15–17). Significantly, Adam is the covenant head of Eve in two respects: (1) he is *universally* the federal head for the entire human race (Eve included); and (2) he is *exclusively* Eve's head according to God's design in the covenant of marriage (Gen 2:20–25; Eph 5:22–33). Adam's headship is typological in *both* respects, as his headship over Eve in marriage is the norm for all sub-

sequent marriages,⁹ and according to the Apostle Paul, is itself a type of the Christ-church union (Eph 5:31–32). Moreover, Adam’s federal headship in the CoW over all humanity is a type of Christ’s headship over his elect in the CoG, such that in the CoW Adam is a pattern for the Last Adam; and as thus, being male is a necessary precondition by God’s appointment for representing humanity before God.

At its most basic level, a covenant is a formal arrangement between at least two parties. In the Bible covenants are not natural arrangements, but involve promises freely given or conditioned upon a specified action on the part of the covenant partner with whom God condescends to oblige himself.¹⁰ As heirs of the Reformed tradition, we are convinced God’s covenants carry the progress of revelation across the canon of Scripture. Reformed theology traditionally affirms the CoW¹¹ and the

CoG.¹² Though there is much debate regarding how the biblical covenants (i.e., Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic) fit within these two arrangements,¹³ what is largely agreed upon is that Adam is representative of the CoW and Christ is representative of the CoG. We affirm the CoW and CoG, and find this theological terminology faithfully represents the teaching of Genesis 2:15–17 and aligns with the Adam-Christ parallel Paul teaches in the NT (Rom 5:12–21; 1 Cor 15:45–49).¹⁴

The CoW we read of in Genesis 2:15–17 is made exclusively between God and Adam (Eve was not yet created, see Gen 2:18), which is natural, good, and fitting. Moreover, it explains why the progenitor principle (i.e., “for Adam was formed first, then Eve”) is cited by Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12–13 as the grounds for male-only preaching (function) and thus pastoring (office) in the New Covenant church. What we mean to

⁹ It is vital that we distinguish the concept of federal representation whereby the covenant head stands before God vertically — Adam in the place of humanity and Christ in the place of the elect — and the husband’s covenantal headship horizontally between the spouses in marriage. In the creation account, Adam fulfills both roles of covenantal headship, which is not the case for each subsequent husband.

¹⁰ As Nehemiah Coxé explains, “None can oblige God, or make him their Debtor, unless he condescend to oblige himself by Covenant or Promise.” *A Discourse of the Covenants That God made with Men before the Law. Wherein, The Covenant of Circumcision is more largely handled, and the Invalidity of the Plea for Paedobaptism taken from thence discovered* (London: J.D., 1681), 6.

¹¹ We find the Reformed tradition has correctly affirmed an original covenant of works/Adamic covenant. The covenant of works is defined well by Richard Barcellos, “The covenant of works is that divinely sanctioned commitment or relationship God imposed upon Adam in the garden of Eden. Adam was a sinless representative of mankind (i.e., a public person), and an image-bearing son of God. The covenant God made with him was for the bettering of man’s state, conditioned upon Adam’s obedience, with a penalty for disobedience. Here we have: 1) sovereign, divine imposition; 2) representation by Adam (i.e., federal headship), a sinless image-bearing son of God; 3) a conditional element (i.e., obedience); 4) a penalty for disobedience (i.e., death); and 5) a promise of reward (i.e., eschatological potential).” *Getting the Garden Right: Adam’s Work and God’s Rest in Light of Christ* (Cape Coral, FL: Founder’s Press, 2023), 38.

¹² We are in full agreement with Francis Turretin’s understanding of *pactum merit* as it relates to the CoW and the CoG: “If therefore upright man in that state had obtained this merit, it must not be understood properly and rigorously. Since man has all things from and owes all to God, he can seek from him nothing as his own by right, nor can God be a debtor to him — not by condignity of work and from its intrinsic value (because whatever that may be, it can bear no proportion to the infinite reward of life), but from the pact and the liberal promise of God (according to which man had the right of demanding the reward to which God had of his own accord bound himself) and in comparison with the covenant of grace (which rests upon the sole merit of Christ, by which he acquired for us the right to life). However, this demanded antecedently a proper and personal obedience by which he obtained both his own justification before God and life, as the stipulated reward of his labors.” Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992–97), I: 578.

¹³ In our previous essay, “Gender Essentialism in Anthropological, Covenantal, and Christological Perspective,” we give considerable space to teasing out what we believe to be the best way to understand God’s covenantal arrangements in the creation narrative, wherein we contend the CoW is a subset of the broader Creation Covenant structures.

¹⁴ A crucial proof-text for understanding Genesis 2:15–17 as covenantal is Hosea 6:7, which reads: “But like Adam [Israel and Judah] transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me.” Passages like this one give sound biblical and theological grounds to conclude God made a covenant with Adam as the federal representative of all humanity, one that Adam failed to keep.



highlight here is *not* that male-only eldership is grounded in the CoW, but that the CoW/CoG, and the reality of male-headship in the marriage covenant (Eph 5:22; 1 Cor 11:3) and God's household (i.e., the church, 1 Tim 3:1–7; 15) flow from God's creation order design. God's gracious covenantal arrangements correspond with the essence and existence of humans as male and female, meaning such arrangements are not arbitrary but fitting with *who* he has made men and women to be and *what* he calls them to do.¹⁵

So, the progenitor principle as it relates to Adam in creation is therefore revelatory of God's election of Adam as federal head, such that being created prior to Eve explains how his headship is propagated. In short, Adam's appointment to this role is not a result of his order of creation, rather his order of creation reveals his appointment. Furthermore, this appointment was not arbitrary, such that God could have interchangeably created Eve first and appointed her the head. In sum, there is a reason why every covenant head across the biblical narrative

is male, as there is something about the male instantiation of the human essence that makes men particularly qualified for such a role by God's design. This is not so much argued for in Scripture as it is assumed in God's revelation as his covenantal arrangements ratify created order.

Adam, accordingly, is qualified to represent Eve and each of his progeny (male and female alike) in the CoW due to the reality that he (1) shares in human essence with all those he represents since he exists as a male instantiation of the human nature, and (2) was appointed by God via covenant to represent all humanity. He is thus a type of Christ in the CoG who would likewise partake of human essence as a male, and was appointed by God to represent the elect.

IN EVERY RESPECT: THE SON'S ASSUMPTION OF MALE HUMANITY

The author of Hebrews declares that the Son of God "had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest

¹⁵ This is not to suggest that all men are the head of all women, as the covenantal headship of men over women is limited to the husband and wife relationship, and the church under its male pastors/elders.

in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb 2:17). According to this text, if Jesus Christ’s humanity is not like the humanity of those he came to save “in every respect,” then he cannot be a “merciful and faithful high priest” and cannot “make propitiation for the sins of the people.” Gregory of Nazianzus summarized the point well in his famous line to Cleodnius: “Whatever is not assumed is not healed.”¹⁶ We contend that “in every respect” means that the particular *existence* of the human nature assumed by the Son had to be a genuine instantiation of the *essence* of humanity.

This conceptual framework is especially helpful when thinking through the fact that Jesus is a male savior who is able to save both male and female human beings. Some have suggested that Jesus’ maleness presents a problem with respect to his ability to save women because he did not assume female flesh. However, Jesus’ maleness does not differentiate him from females *essentially*. Rather, his particular maleness demonstrates his solidarity with *all* gendered human beings, male and female, because *being gendered as either male or female* is an essential property of humanity. In principle, the question is one of the particular (human existence) and the universal (human essence). Jesus can save particular human beings whose *existence* is distinct from his own because he shares in common

with them the *essence* of humanity. Therefore, the so-called “problem” of the male Savior is a problem fabricated by minds held captive to the spirit of the age. The male Savior can most certainly save all men *and women* who believe in him, as the Scriptures testify. The only obstacle to experiencing the saving benefits of the male Savior’s atoning work is not one’s gender, but one’s unbelief.

The Necessity of Christ’s Maleness for Covenantal Headship

All of this raises a further question: was it necessary for the Son of God to assume *male* human nature? Since all that is required *vis-a-vis* gender to be truly human “in every respect” is that one be particularly gendered as either male or female, might it have been possible for the Savior to have been a woman? Could a woman have saved people from their sins? We believe the biblical answer to this question is a clear and resounding *no*, for two reasons.

First, there is a fittingness to the Son’s incarnation as a man owing to his eternal identity as the Son of God. It would be confusing, to say the least, for the eternal *Son* to enter history and live a human life as a *daughter*. The Redeemer would then be both a Son and a daughter (in two different respects).¹⁷

Secondly, the Son of God had to assume

¹⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, “Letter 101: To Cleodnius,” in *On God and Christ*, ed. and trans. Lionel Wickham (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 158.

¹⁷ We contend, against the current of feminist and egalitarian literature, that human sonship is the analog to the eternal sonship of the second person of the Trinity in relation to the first. That is, we do not believe that the second person of the Trinity is named Son as a metaphorical extension of human sonship. This would make the analog of sonship run from the creature to the naming of the divine person, and the name of the second person of the Trinity would be a mere figure of speech. We believe it is exactly the opposite. Just as human fatherhood is an analog to the original Fatherhood of God, as Ephesians 3:14-15 makes explicit, so human sonship is an analogy to the original Sonship of the eternal Son in relation to the Father. For a more detailed account of the logic of analogical predication in the doctrine of God and the difference between proper and figurative analogical predication, see Kyle’s essay, “Theological Language and the Fatherhood of God: An Exegetical and Dogmatic Account” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 5.2 (Fall 2023): 46-77.

human nature as a male because God has ordered creation in such a way that only men function as covenant heads. Thus, the essential solidarity of Christ with all those he came to save (men and women) is not the only relevant factor with respect to the specific gender of the Son's assumed humanity. The Son had to be gendered as a male to be the last Adam and federal head of the redeemed people of God.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, we have sought to prove that the classic distinction between essence and existence corresponds faithfully with holy Scripture's account of the unity and distinction of mankind as male and female. To do so, we synthesized this model with the Reformed categories of the Covenant of Works and Covenant of Grace to amplify how these arrangements assume and affirm the distinctions we make between essence and existence and reveal the fittingness of men to represent both men and women as covenant heads. This reality

is foundational for grasping why Christ as the covenant head of the redeemed (men and women alike) must be male. We find this approach provides a firm dogmatic foundation for gender essentialism, granting theological precision to aid us in not conflating these categories to the detriment of our anthropology and Christology. ✕

Kyle D. Claunch is Associate Professor of Christian Theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary where he has served since 2017. He and his wife Ashley live with their six children in Louisville, KY. He has more than twenty years of experience in pastoral ministry and is an elder of Kenwood Baptist Church.

Michael R. Carlino is the Operations Director for CBMW, a PhD candidate in Systematic Theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and an Adjunct Professor of Christian Theology at Boyce College. He and his wife Kylie live with their two children in Clarksville, IN. He is a member of Kenwood Baptist Church where he serves as a Youth Leader.





Is Nicaea Enough?

On Moral Revisionism and
Appeals to the Creeds



In the midst of pursuing catholicity and a common faith in a multi-denominational world, we are sympathetic to the phrase, “Nicaea is enough” (NiE). By this people seem to mean that, when trying to articulate boundaries for orthodoxy and, thus, for who is and who is not a Christian, the Nicene Creed, or more often the Apostles’ Creed, serves as the arbiter. In this model, someone who affirms historic Christian teaching on the Trinity, the hypostatic union, the necessity of Christ’s work for salvation, the church as the people of God, and the expectation that Christ will return in glory should be considered a Christian. We as Baptists can agree with a wide range of denominations and traditions on these fundamental points, even as we recognize a need to articulate more fully various theological and ecclesiological nuances that are both addressed and not addressed in the creeds.

However, sometimes NiE is an appeal to the acceptability of holding either doctrinal and/or moral standards beyond what was laid down in the creeds. Doctrinally, for instance, bibliology is not addressed in the creeds; therefore, according to this NiE way of thinking, Christians can believe a whole host of different positions about Scripture. NiE has, for example, been used as part of a much larger paradigm arguing against the recent Baptist emphasis on inerrancy.¹

On the issue of morality, NiE has become a recourse for some to say that, for instance, sexuality is not addressed in the

Creeds, and therefore Christians can believe a whole host of different ideas about gender and sexuality.² In this scenario, NiE is employed not as a genuine attempt at doctrinal catholicity, but as a euphemism for capitulating to our current cultural climate regarding gender and sexuality. Rather than an attempt at maintaining and retrieving classical Christian orthodoxy in a new context, this sentiment attempts to slide non-traditional teachings through a supposed creedal gap. This approach is moral revisionism — an attempt to revise Christianity’s traditional moral teachings while attempting to maintain a status in or relationship to the church.

What can we say to this? As evangelicals who love the creeds, we believe there are at least three responses we can give to this sentiment and ultimately claim that Nicaea, or even the three ecumenical creeds and seven ecumenical councils all together, is not enough to measure what is properly a Christian confession.

1. SCRIPTURE IS THE ULTIMATE AUTHORITY, NOT CREEDS

The first and most important point to make here is that the creeds and councils are not the ultimate arbiter of what counts as properly apostolic. That position, from a Protestant perspective, lies ultimately with Scripture alone. While creeds and confessions help codify, at a particular historical moment, the church’s ministerially and derivatively authoritative summary of Scrip-

¹ Steven R. Harmon, *Toward Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock / Paternoster, 2006).

² See, e.g., Jonathan Merritt, “Why I’ll take courageous Jen Hatmaker over her cowardly critics any day,” *Religion News Service*, May 2, 2017, <https://religionnews.com/2017/05/02/why-ill-take-courageous-jen-hatmaker-over-her-cowardly-critics-any-day/>.



ture, it is Scripture alone that holds the primary place. Therefore, even if we do not have a creed that addresses an explicit departure from Scripture, it is still just that — a departure from Scripture. Further, many Protestants feel free to reject the seventh ecumenical council's decision on icons because they deem it a departure from Scripture, while still holding fast to the Nicene Creed and Chalcedonian Definition as faithful summaries of biblical truth. And Scripture is clear that there are simple errors and then there are departures — the former, mistakes to be corrected; the latter, clear rejections of biblical teaching that result in communal exclusion. This leads to the next point.

2. SCRIPTURE ADDRESSES VARIOUS TYPES OF ERRORS THAT LEAD TO EXCOMMUNICATION

The idea that only those issues addressed by the early church warrant excommunication misses the force of many scriptural statements about casting out false teachers and those who live in unrepentant sin. While many assume that “false teaching”

is only directly related to doctrinal issues, like John's forceful argument against docetism in 1 John 4, Scripture does not limit false teaching to doctrine. For instance, Jesus threatens covenant exclusion for those in the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira who follow, respectively, the Nicolaitan and Jezebelian teachings about sexual immorality (Rev 2:14–15; 19–23). We could add to this the instances where Paul addresses excommunication and ties it explicitly to divisiveness (e.g. Titus 3:10). The Jerusalem Council addressed several issues for admitting Gentiles into the faith, including abstaining from sexual immorality (Acts 15). In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul commands the church to excommunicate a man *for committing sexual sin* and includes homosexuality in the list of sins only a chapter later.

The point is that exclusion from the covenant community is not limited in Scripture to doctrinal issues, nor to some kind of arbitrary doctrinal ranking system. Instead, it covers doctrinal, moral, *and* communal rejections of biblical authority. Though chapter-and-verse citations are enough to reveal

serious errors in Scripture, we also must pay attention to patterns and types. For instance, same-sex sexual relationships are certainly condemned specifically in a number of passages (Lev 18:22; Rom 1:26–28; 1 Cor 6:9–10). But we do not merely have these passages as reference. We can also point to larger theological patterns, like the creation of “male and female,” whose complementarity includes the ability to procreate in Genesis 1–2 or the metaphor of Christ and the church being wrapped up in the marriage of a man and woman (Eph 5:22–33). Both the Bible’s explicit words *and* fundamental patterns reveal that from Genesis to Revelation, same-sex sexual relationships are not only frowned upon or prohibited, but cut at the very root of God’s design for mankind and its *telos* in the new creation with Christ.³

3. THE CREEDS ARE CONTEXTUAL, NOT EXHAUSTIVE, DOCUMENTS

It should be obvious from studying church history that the councils and creeds arose out of specific controversies about specific issues. For instance, the Nicene Creed dealt primarily with the issue of Christ’s divinity. Constantinople dealt with numerous trinitarian and christological errors. Ephesus and Chalcedon continued to hone the church’s articulation of orthodox Christology. These councils dealt with other issues, of course, like the Christian calendar and pastoral ethics. But simply put, there was no major controversy facing the church

over gender and sexuality in the first centuries of the church’s existence.

Brandan Robertson muses that the creeds were formulated by imperial puppets who only cared about what the Emperor cared about, but

if Christianity hadn’t been co-opted by the Empire . . . I believe the question of homosexuality and gender would have been addressed in a more “mainstream” Christian context hundreds if not thousands of years before it was. Any student of church history knows that everything considered “orthodoxy” today was a product of imperial influence — the early church fathers that were appointed to Councils at Nicaea, Chalcedon, etc., were people that had risen through the ranks because they proved themselves faithful to the Emperor.⁴

This cynical argument from silence falls flat on “any student of church history” on several fronts, but we will point out the most obvious for our purposes here.⁵ The creeds were products of Christian teachings in the church, not merely products of conciliar debate. Every major council deliberated in large part already-existing writings and teachings that were in dispute. Thus, we know as much or more about the creeds’ intent and hermeneutic by reading letters, sermons, and treatises from Christian leaders of the day. They did not show up with a blank slate and an itinerary from the Emperor. For example,

³ See the comprehensive study of Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002).

⁴ Brandan Robertson, *The Gospel of Inclusion: A Christian Case for LGBT+ Inclusion in the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 90.

⁵ Space limits us from addressing the Constantinian practice of largely allowing the church to adjudicate its own disputes, he and his sons’ various agreements and disagreements with bishops, and his willingness to allow the church to reject even his own suggestions of reinstating those deemed heretical (for example, his attempted rehabilitation of Arius).

Arius had already been condemned by the African church long before Constantine called the Council of Nicaea.

So, in the scenario presented by Robertson, we would need evidence that this was a disputed issue among early Christian leaders, or that there was a contingent who affirmed same-sex sexual relationships even though a council never arose to deal with it. Given the writings of the early church and the clear taken-for-granted view that there were two sexes and marriage was between a man and woman, we could surmise rather easily that a council would have called this a heresy had the issue arisen. It simply would have been a departure from moral orthodoxy in the minds of early Christians. As with Irenaeus's clash with the "Gnostics" or the fourth-century debates over the Trinity and Christology, the church was not in search of a doctrine, but rather responded to views that proved disparate from the church's teaching and that affected laypeople and ecclesial practice. Certainly a large contingent of church leaders — or even one influential dissenter — arguing for the orthodoxy of homosexual practice or gender-alteration would have been seen as divergent from the church's teaching, or at least would have caused controversy.⁶ This never happened, for a reason.

Further, while the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology were relatively settled by the three ecumenical creeds and seven ecumenical councils, these are not the only doctrines that caused first-order

controversies. One only needs to remember the Reformation to realize that, in that case, the doctrines of soteriology (especially justification) and ecclesiology still needed to be clarified at an ecclesiastical level. For Protestants, the five *solae* of the Reformation function similarly to creeds as foundational boundary-markers for orthodoxy, even while they are not technically formalized in a creed. The point is that, as important as the three ecumenical creeds and seven ecumenical councils are, they did not address every doctrinal issue that could be considered of first importance. In the midst of two-thousand years of various debates and even schisms, it is telling that the issue of gender and sexuality was never disputed enough to cause even a minor stir until recently, after the divergent views of the Sexual Revolution began to infiltrate the church.

Of course, this does not mean that Nicaea does not address *at all* issues of anthropology, or bibliology, or even soteriology and ecclesiology. As Luke Stamps has noted, the Creed assumes both an anthropology — "for us men" — and a hamartiology — "for the forgiveness of sins." The idea that either of these attenuated statements, about doctrines that were not under dispute at the time, leave room for contemporary, novel, deviant views on gender and sexuality is, frankly, ludicrous. While the writers of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed did not spell out their views on anthropology or hamartiology, they certainly held them clearly and closely, and their basic statements ought not to be read anachronistically to allow for views they most definitely

⁶ A few obvious examples of many: in *Contra Celsum*, Origen of Alexandria uses homosexual practice in Romans 1:27 to describe pagan ethical debauchery. Eusebius of Caesarea lists marriage between same-sex couples as "unlawful" in his *Demonstratio*. Both Clement of Alexandria in his *Pedagogue* and Jerome in his commentary on Isaiah refer to Genesis 19:5 in describing Lot's visitors as committing homosexual sin.

would have rejected. To reiterate, they did not spell out their views on anthropology or hamartiology because there was no controversy about those issues in their day. But that does not mean that there are not contexts in which those issues do need to be addressed — contexts like our own.

And this brings us back to the former aspect of creeds and confessions that NiE ignores: they arise out of specific socio-cultural situations where certain doctrinal controversies must be addressed. In the providence of God, the church first had to deal with the Trinity and Christology. But this doesn't mean that controversies surrounding other doctrines are not of first-order importance. Of course, that doesn't mean that *every* controversy is of first-order importance. But it does mean that some deviations from traditional Christian teaching are. The patristic and early medieval period addressed the Trinity and Christology; the Reformation addressed soteriology and ecclesiology; and it seems to us that, today, we need to address bibliology and anthropology.

The way to tell if modern deviations from traditional Christian teaching are first-order departures brings us back to the first point: does it clearly depart from the apostolic deposit, Holy Scripture, and in such a way that it can be characterized as a rejection of Scripture's authority? Does it require such a fundamental reformulation of traditional Christian teaching that it would be unrecognizable to any Christian prior to 1950? Yes, people can come to different interpretive conclusions, but this does not make them all correct. And as Protestants, our theological method calls us to return to Scripture again and again.

NICAEA IS AND IS NOT ENOUGH

In conclusion, we might say that Nicaea both *is* and *is not* enough to articulate orthodox Christian teachings. It certainly is enough in terms of offering a basic summary of Scripture's teaching on Christ's divinity and the purpose of incarnation. It is not enough, however, to arbitrate every jot and tittle of Christian orthodoxy and ecclesial catholicity. Moral revisionists who point to the creeds as the only measure of orthodoxy run into three major roadblocks. First, because Scripture is our ultimate authority. Second, because doctrinal assent is not the only scriptural measure for inclusion in the covenant community of God. And third, because the councils and creeds were never meant to be exhaustive articulations of Christian orthodoxy. Every generation has its own theological challenges, and they must meet them with the final arbiter of truth — Holy Scripture. ✕

Matthew Y. Emerson is dean of theology, arts, and humanities at Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee, as well an executive director of the Center for Baptist Renewal. He's the author of "He Descended to the Dead": An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday.

Brandon D. Smith is chair of the Hobbs School of Theology and Ministry and associate professor of theology and early Christianity at Oklahoma Baptist University. He is also a cofounder of the Center for Baptist Renewal and host of the Church Grammar podcast.



A Critique of Karen B. Keen's Hermeneutical Method

How one interprets a text will dictate what one believes, including about sexual ethics. Therefore, due to the importance of correctly interpreting the Bible's sexual ethic, I will critique how Karen R. Keen, who professes to be an LGBTQ-affirming Christian, concludes that the Bible affirms same-sex relationships.¹ I will argue that Keen's arguments are flawed as she misinterprets the meaning of the law, the fruit of the Spirit, and Romans 1:24–27.

WHAT IS THE MAIN INTENT OF THE LAW IN LEVITICUS?

Karen Keen's hermeneutical method can

be seen through her interpretation of the Old Testament laws prohibiting same-sex relationships and her implementation of virtue ethics in living out the fruit of the Spirit to deem an action right and pleasing to God. Her main argument is that we should interpret these laws by seeing God's main intent of the law to promote a "good and just world" that "provides care for neighbor, fair treatment, compensation for offenses, and general well-being."² Keen is correct that one of the purposes of the law was to promote a good and just society, to protect the helpless, provide for the needy, and treat others the way we would want to be treated. Her under-

¹ Keen is the founder of The Redwood Center for Spiritual Care and Education and holds a Th.M. in Biblical Studies from Duke Divinity School. Keen's hermeneutical method can be seen specifically in two of her recent books: *The Word of a Humble God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022) referred to as TWHG, and *Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships*, (United Kingdom: Eerdmans, 2018), referred to as "Sexual Ethics."

² Keen, *Sexual Ethics*, 50.

standing, however, of the main intent of the law is only partially correct. By observing the larger context of the Holiness Code in Leviticus, as well as the biblical narrative, it becomes clear that her definition of a “good and just society” that affirms same-sex relationships is found wanting on several fronts.³

The Holiness Code

To start, we need to observe the texts about homosexuality in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Keen says we must see the main intent of the law from this passage — how it promotes a good and just society — in order to understand how we must obey these principles today. The intent of the law is found in the moral law underlying each of the civil laws given in the Old Testament. As Keen argues, the reason we cannot simply throw away these commands entirely is because they are tied to the nature and character of God, and there is a reason why God gave them to us.⁴ The civil applications of this law (putting someone to death who commits homosexuality) are no longer binding, not because God did not inspire them, but because we no longer live in a theocentric society like Israel. So, the question we must answer is how the command for a man not to lie with a man is connected to the eternal, moral nature

that reflects God’s unchanging character. Why would God specifically give this sexual ethic? And how does this command promote a good and just society according to God?

To see how this command connects with God’s moral character, we must understand the literary context in which the law was given, beginning with its inclusion in the Pentateuch.⁵ In Genesis, Moses describes God as the Creator who is good and has made all things for his glory (Gen 1–2; Isa 43:7; Col 1:16). God made human beings specifically in his image to represent him through all the earth by emulating his character.⁶ Humanity’s sole purpose was to glorify and enjoy God forever in a relationship with him, and the way they worshiped and demonstrated their love for God was through obeying his commands.⁷

God revealed humanity’s sexual ethic through the establishment of the first marriage in Genesis 2. In verses 20–24, we read that to allow man to fulfill his task to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth (Gen 1:27–28), God created a woman to help him so that together they could fill the world with worshippers who would glorify him.⁸ God made woman different from man but equally in his image to complement man, so that together they could

³ Keen only defines righteousness and justice in terms of our relationships with other humans and loving them. Although practicing righteousness and justice involve how we treat and love others, the Bible grounds righteousness, justice, and love in the character of God. “The commands of Scripture are meant to be obeyed precisely because our obedience demonstrates our love for God and because our obedience is the best path to bring a just alignment of all things to God’s eternal plan. His standard of justice and love must be the standard by which we determine and evaluate what actions and behaviors we believe to be just and loving.” Mark Liederbach and Evan Lenow, *Ethics as Worship: The Pursuit of Moral Discipleship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2021), 296.

⁴ Liederbach and Lenow, *Ethics as Worship*, 148.

⁵ James M. Hamilton Jr, “How to Condone What the Bible Condemns: Matthew Vines Takes On The Old Testament,” in *God and The Gay Christian: A Response To Matthew Vines*, ed. R. Albert Mohler (Louisville, KY: SBT Press, 2014), 28–29.

⁶ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *God’s Kingdom through God’s Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 70–85.

⁷ Liederbach and Lenow, *Ethics as Worship*, 43–48.

⁸ Liederbach and Lenow, *Ethics as Worship*, 50.

fulfill God's command to multiply and fill the earth.⁹ We also learn from Genesis 1–2 that everything God created was good (Gen 1:31) — since God himself is good and just. He can do no wrong (Deut 32:4). We can therefore conclude that, in the creation of marriage between one man and one woman, God provided a clear sexual ethic for mankind. Only in obedience to it will humanity emulate God's moral nature and promote a good and just world that would glorify his name.

Moving now to the immediate literary context, the Holiness Code (Lev 17–26) was explicitly given to set Israel apart as different from other nations so that the nations would see the glory and holiness of God through his people and lead them to worship and serve Yahweh (Lev 20:26; 1 Pet 1:16). All the Levitical laws can be summed up in the idea that Israel was not to be like the other nations. One way God specifically commanded Israel not to be like the other nations was by abstaining from participating in many forms of sexual immorality, including homosexuality.¹⁰ The reason God gave these prohibitions against homosexuality was because it contradicts his holy design established for sexual relations in Genesis 1–2. Homosexual acts do not represent God's holy character, reflected in his design for sexuality, but instead represent a distorted picture of sex that was prac-

ticed by the surrounding nations.

But contrary to this expression of orthodox Christian sexual ethics, Keen argues that the main intent of the prohibitions against same-sex relationships in Leviticus was due to a violation of gender norms, lack of procreative potential, participation in pagan practices, and participation in male prostitution. Therefore, Israel was commanded not to participate in homosexual acts not because they went against God's holy and moral character as revealed in the first marriage, but only because they would lead to pagan worship practices that exploited and harmed others.¹¹ Keen's interpretation, however, does not properly place this command in its literary context. Contrary to Keen, William Loader, who affirms same-sex relationships, says that the commands against homosexual actions cannot be placed merely in cultic contexts (pagan worship, procreative potential, patriarchal hierarchy). Instead, these acts are an offense against God because they go against his divine will.¹²

God gave these commands because he wanted his people to imitate his holiness and be different from the other nations. God called his people to be holy as he was holy. An essential part of living a holy life to God is living a holy sexual ethic congruent with the creation order and set apart from the surrounding nations. The Bible makes clear in the Old Testament and the

⁹ Although one of the purposes of sexual differentiation is procreation, it does have meaning apart from the procreative purpose. Human procreative ability is removed from God's image and shifted to a special word of blessing. Marriage between a man and a woman was not created solely for procreation but also for the different ways God made their bodies to be fitted together in a one flesh union. M. Richard Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 49. Liederbach and Lenow link being made in God's image and likeness with the command to subdue and rule over the earth; and being made male and female with the command to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. Therefore, this dispels the misunderstanding that a person must be married to live out the image of God. *Ethics as Worship*, 50–51.

¹⁰ Liederbach and Lenow, *Ethics as Worship*, 588.

¹¹ Keen, *Sexual Ethics*, 19–20.

¹² William Loader, "Homosexuality and the Bible," *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, And the Church*, ed. Preston Sprinkle (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 22–23.

New Testament (as we will see) that the sexual ethic that promotes a good and just world from God's perspective coheres with the creation ordinance of a one-flesh covenant union between a husband and wife. Anything outside of this act is breaking God's commands and is sin against God.¹³ For this reason Robert Gagnon writes, "It [homosexual acts] is nothing short of a rebellion against the way God made humans to function as sexual beings...[there is solid] evidence for the enduring validity of Lev 18:22 and 20:13."¹⁴

DO SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS PRODUCE THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT?

Keen exhibits a consequentialist system of ethics when she justifies homosexual-

ity by what she sees as the "fruit of the spirit" produced by most gay and lesbian people. Keen says "Virtues are about *who* a person is, whereas rules [or commands] address *what* a person does. Good character is the fountain from which ethical behavior flows."¹⁵ In her logic, if same-sex relationships produce the fruit of the Spirit, then these actions must be virtuous. For example, she argues that loving, monogamous same-sex relationships exemplify the fruit of the Spirit because they are founded upon selfless love for the other. Keen says, "If Jesus says that all the law can be summed up in love, then don't these relationships meet that requirement?. . . if we act out virtue by loving and caring for others, the outcome will always be the will of God

¹³ Also, if same-sex relationships do promote a good and just world and this is the main intent of the law, would it not make sense for God to give a clear command that same-sex relationships are permissible? Yet the only testimony we find in the Old and New Testaments is negative, not positive.

¹⁴ Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 156–157.

¹⁵ Keen, *Sexual Ethics*, 56.





(Luke 11:41).”¹⁶ Thus, using the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23 to define her virtue ethics, she concludes that sin is only what violates this list of integral qualities, specifically in how one treats and relates to others. But is this how the Bible defines sin?

The Bible does not, in fact. First, this understanding of sin does not follow the pattern of Jesus’ life. First John 2:4–6 says that we know we are in Christ if we walk in the same way he did. Part of what constitutes a legitimate reading for Keen is built upon knowing God and imitating the life of Jesus. However, based on Matthew 5:28–30 and 19:4–6, Jesus did not believe in, prescribe, or live out this

sexual ethic. Jesus humbled himself and submitted to the Father’s will in fully obeying and teaching his commands, including those about sexual ethics. Therefore, indulging in same-sex relationships is not consistent with loving God and obeying his commands.

Second, it is also hard to see how Keen can interpret Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 to say that God approves of Christian monogamous same-sex relationships when, at the same time, he calls these acts an “abomination” in both verses.¹⁷ Richard Davidson explains the significance of the word abomination: “The fact that among the list of specific prohibitions of sexual acts in Leviticus, the word *toeba* is men-

¹⁶ Keen, *Sexual Ethics*, 56.

¹⁷ Keen, *Sexual Ethics*, 20.

tioned only regarding homosexual intercourse indicates the degree of revulsion associated with homosexual activity. Indeed, in the entire Pentateuch, the only forbidden sexual act to which the word *toeba* is specifically attached is homosexual intercourse.”¹⁸ Also, contrary to scholars who argue that abomination is used only because it is connected with ritual and cultic practices, by observing the use of the word in the Torah and the Hebrew Bible, “this revulsion for homosexual activity goes far beyond its association with the cultic practices of surrounding nations.”¹⁹ Therefore, practicing homosexual acts would not be loving God supremely and loving what he loves; it is, rather, loving what he hates (Rom 12:10).

Third, Keen seems to neglect the literary context of important passages in Romans and Galatians. She argues from Romans 13:8–10 that “the whole purpose of the law is to teach us to love one another.” Thus if a person loves their same-sex partner, they are fulfilling the law. However, right after verse 10, Paul says in verses 12–14 that Christians must no longer walk in the night but must cast off the works of darkness. One of the works of darkness he lists is sexual immorality, which undoubtedly includes homosexuality. Thus, Keen’s definition of love and fulfilling the law from this passage neglects the immediate context in which Paul condemns homosexuality (also see Romans 1 and the argument below). In Galatians 5:22–25, she says loving, monogamous same-sex relationships fulfill the fruit

of the Spirit because they are “fully capable of fulfilling the fruit of the Spirit.” However, right before listing these virtues, Paul describes the deeds of the flesh that are contrary to the Spirit. One of the vices Paul mentions is sexual immorality (*porneia*). In a first-century Jewish mind, *porneia* would directly refer to homosexual practices that the Old Testament law condemned and, as stated above, were considered an abomination to the Lord (Lev 18:22; 20:13).²⁰ Therefore, one of the deeds of the flesh that gays and lesbians practice is in contradiction with the “fruit” that their lives are producing. Paul makes clear in Galatians 5:17–19 that the deeds of the flesh are contrary to the fruit of the Spirit, and one cannot walk in the fruit of the Spirit if they are living out the desires of the flesh. Therefore, based on the testimony of Scripture and a proper interpretation of Galatians 5:22–23 in its literary and historical context, same-sex relationships do not produce the fruit of the Spirit, nor does God approve them as virtuous acts.

IS THE CONDEMNATION OF SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS CONTINUED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

I have established that the testimony of the Old Testament strongly condemns same-sex relationships regardless of the situation or context. These acts are an abomination to God, do not emulate his holy and moral character, and contradict the sexual ethic he has prescribed to promote a good and just world. Is there any change in this negative tone against

¹⁸ Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 151.

¹⁹ Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 152.

²⁰ Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 634.



same-sex relationships in the New Testament? By observing Jesus and the apostles' teaching on same-sex relationships, the tone does not change from negative to positive but seems to become harsher against all forms of sexual immorality, including same-sex relationships.²¹ We can discern this truth by hearing what Paul says in Romans 1:24–27 and examining the phrase “contrary to nature.”

First, Keen claims that when Paul condemns homosexual acts and deems them “unnatural” (*para physin*), he was influenced by the Stoicism of his day as well as the Greco-Roman culture, which had a strong male hierarchy. She concludes that Paul's thinking must have been affected by the culture to say homosexual acts were unnatural. There is no evidence, however, that Paul's thinking aligned with the Greco-Roman culture of his day. In fact, there are numerous examples in Paul's letters where he wrote and commanded the church to do things contrary to what was normally accepted in his culture.²²

Second, by simply examining how Paul uses the Greek phrase *para physin*, we can see that Keen's interpretation of the phrase *para physin* is unsustainable. Keen says this phrase is used to describe conventional opinions that were created in Paul's world due to the strong patriarchy and male dominance in the Greco-Roman world.²³

²¹ Rebecca McLaughlin, *Does the Bible Affirm Same-Sex Relationships?* (United Kingdom: The Good Book Co., 2024), 79.

²² Paul spoke against the Greco-Roman household codes of slavery by considering slaves as human beings with equal rights and by calling masters to treat their servants with love and respect as their brothers (Philemon; 1 Cor 7:20–23; Eph 6:5–9). He also taught on the equality of husbands and wives in a culture that said men were greater than women in every way except sexuality (Eph 5:15–33; Col 3:18).

²³ R. Karen Keen, “Cultural Influences On Hermeneutical Frameworks in the Debate on Same-Sex Relationships,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, 74.3 (2020), 256.

As a result, Paul condemns homosexual practice because it capsizes the hierarchy of male dominance over females since the male assumes a female role in homosexual acts.

Yet, contrary to Keen, Robert Gagnon has demonstrated that every time Paul uses this phrase in his other letters, it does not refer to personal preferences, prejudices, or culturally conditioned customs but instead describes what something is by divine design.²⁴ Therefore, “nature” refers to the original creation order that God established in Genesis 1–2 and the natural sexual acts that God has blessed, which are those between a husband and wife in covenant marriage. Also, Paul uses the exact Greek words in Romans 1:27 found in Genesis 1:27, Leviticus 18:22, and 20:13 in the Septuagint. About this McLaughlin states, “The fact that Paul uses these same words in Romans underlines the connection with both Leviticus and Genesis — and helps us to understand what he means when he says that same-sex sexual relationships are ‘contrary to nature.’”²⁵

In response, Keen denies that Paul was referring to Genesis but was instead referring to the *Wisdom of Solomon*, where there is language similar to Romans 1. Since *Wisdom* describes those who participate in homosexual acts as pagans and

idolaters, Paul is not referring to Christians who participate in same-sex monogamous relationships but only to how the practice is a result of people who have turned away from God and worshipped idols.²⁶ However, even if Paul is referring to *Wisdom* and not Genesis 1–2, Keen forgets that both Paul and the author of *Wisdom* were writing with a Judeo-Christian worldview of sex and marriage that makes clear from the Pentateuch that God condemns same-sex relationships because they are not compatible with the creation order that he has established from the beginning.²⁷ In light of the context of the biblical narrative, the references to Genesis merit greater validity.²⁸

One last critique of Keen’s interpretation of Romans 1 is in order. According to Keen, Paul condemned homosexual practice because the only forms of homosexual acts he was aware of involved exploitation, prostitution, and pederasty. There are three reasons why this conclusion is invalid. First, if Paul were only referring to pederasty, why did he not use the Greek word *paidierastia*?²⁹ Instead, Paul uses words that generally describe homosexual acts of men committing shameless acts with one another. Second, if Paul was only condemning homosexual acts that were exploitative, why would he condemn both parties who participated in the act? If the homosexual practice

²⁴ Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 226–229; also see Gal 2:14–16; 4:7–9; Rom 2:14–15, 27; 11:21.

²⁵ McLaughlin, *Does the Bible Affirm Same-Sex Relationships?*, 48.

²⁶ Keen, *Sexual Ethics*, 37–38.

²⁷ Liederbach and Lenow note, “To put it another way, we read the Bible from left to right. God set the standard in Genesis 1–2 at the beginning of the Pentateuch. Thus, all Jewish readers would have understood that any other picture of sexuality or marriage differing from Genesis 1–2 would be wrong by default. God does not need to say that it is wrong every time it occurs because that idea was implicit. This [marriage between one man and one woman] union is exclusive and is the only biblically sanctioned context for sexual activity.” Liederbach and Lenow, *Ethics as Worship*, 579–580.

²⁸ For a thorough defense, see Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 289–297.

²⁹ Tremper Longman III, *Confronting Old Testament Controversies: Pressing Questions about Evolution, Sexuality, History, and Violence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019), 240.

was only condemned based on exploitation, then we would expect only the one who penetrated and took advantage of the other should be held liable. Yet, 1 Corinthians 6:9 condemns both the penetrator and the one penetrated as guilty.³⁰ Third, the claim that Paul was not aware of loving, monogamous, same-sex relationships in his day is unfounded by looking at the historical record. History tells us that the three centuries preceding Paul's time are filled with examples of same-sex relationships that are filled with mutual love and compassion,³¹ so it is a mere assumption to claim that Paul was not aware of same-sex relationships that were healthy, loving, and even life-long during his lifetime.³² Louis Crompton, who is a gay man himself and one of the pioneers of queer studies, gets it right by saying, "Nowhere does Paul or any other Jewish writer of this period imply the least acceptance of same-sex relations under any circumstances. The idea that homosexuals might be redeemed by mutual devotion would have been wholly foreign to Paul or any other Jew or early Christian."³³ Thus, Keen's argument that Paul condemned homosexual practice because the only forms of homosexual acts he was aware of involved exploitation, prostitution, and pederasty is untenable based upon the biblical and historical record.

CONCLUSION

Karen Keen seeks to implement a sound

hermeneutical method to arrive at her conclusion that the Bible allows for same-sex relationships. However, her process is flawed because it relies on defective views of inspiration and her own interpretation of the Bible's sexual ethic. Regarding hermeneutics, experiences, and personal feelings are important. Still, the Bible makes clear that our hearts are wicked and deceitful and should not be trusted (Jer 17:9). When practicing a proper hermeneutical method, we must not conform Scripture to our experiences but instead allow our experiences and desires to be transformed by the living and abiding Word of God so that we can offer our bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord, which is our true spiritual worship. ✕

Andrew Slay is the Pastor of Students at Westwood Baptist Church in Cleveland, TN, and is a PhD student at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his wife Ashley have two children.

³⁰ Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 349; Leviticus 20:13 condemns both parties with the death penalty also.

³¹ Plato's Symposium-5 examples (416 BC), Pseudo-Lucianic Affairs of the Heart (300 AD). Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 370.

³² The Warren Cup (5-15 AD), depicted same-sex acts between two consensual adult males.

³³ Louis Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Germany: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 114.

BOOK

REVIEWS

Smartphones, Therapists, and Your Kids:

A Review Essay



Abigail Shrier. *Bad Therapy: Why the Kids Aren't Growing Up*. New York, NY: Sentinel, 2024.

Parenting has never been easy. Parenting *Christianly* — that is, for the glory of God and the salvation of our children’s souls — is impossible.

Impossible, that is, by human power or ingenuity. Our goal is too glorious and supernatural for “expert tips.” Imagine “Ten Steps to Regenerate Your Kids” and you’ll see the problem. And yet our task as Christian dads and moms is not impossible because we are not left to our own strength, but instead have the good news of the gospel, in the power of the Holy Spirit, through the sufficient and authoritative Scriptures, in the midst of the local church. Supplied with these resources, we parent in faith as we pass on the faith once delivered to the coming generations.

And yet, parenting is still hard. But the

reasons for its difficulty vary from age to age. The perennial struggles of the human soul, and the maturation of those young souls to responsible adults, modulates in time to the melody of each generation's riff on the old, old song. Cultural pathologies create parenting challenges. And it's the challenges we're most immersed in that can be the most challenging to spot. Omnipresence renders problems nearly invisible.

That's where Jonathan Haidt and Abigail Shrier's works serve us. In their books *Anxious Generation* and *Bad Therapy*, they give us new eyes to see contemporary parenting problems that are easy to miss because they are *everywhere*. What are those problems? Technology and therapy. So what does parenting amid smartphones and trauma therapists require from us as Christian parents?

In this article, I have two goals: I want to provide an overview of the analysis Haidt and Shrier make of our current parenting moment, and then I want to provide a Christian lens through which to view their work. There's a paradox here: Haidt and Shrier are very good at diagnosing a problem, better than most Christian parents. But their diagnosis of the problems are mostly partial and incomplete, and (in one specific case) harmful. We need a thoughtful engagement with their work on explicitly Christian presuppositions.

GROWING UP ON MARS: HAIDT'S ARGUMENT

Haidt begins *Anxious Generation* with a brilliant thought experiment. Imagine a billionaire investor asking parents to sign their kids up for an innovative venture:

growing up on Mars. Your kids will have fantastic new opportunities and be on the cutting edge of a new kind of adolescence, you're told.

"What are the risks?" you ask.

"We haven't explored those," the designer responds.

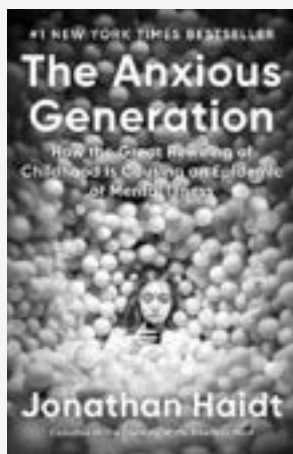
"Has this been done before?" you continue, growing more concerned.

"No, never," comes the reply. "What could go wrong?"

No responsible parent would enroll their kids in such a project. And then Haidt springs the trap: what if allowing our kids to pass through adolescence with a smartphone in their pockets was the same kind of untested experiment?

By the time he is done summarizing the sociological and psychological literature, the argument is convincing: smartphones are indeed a new kind of experiment in development. Haidt isn't a luddite, and he's not narrowly obsessed with iPhones. It's the unique combination of ubiquitous internet access, selfie-capable camera devices, and social media that makes the smartphone a potent symbol of a new kind of growing up. And ironically, Haidt maintains, we've managed to weave this new digital access into an era of parenting that also minimizes real-world, material engagement and experiences. Phones are "experience blockers" that distract users from the real world around them. In his memorable line, we "overprotect in the real world and under-protect in the digital world." In other words, we need a little less screen time and a few more skinned knees.

Haidt's book consists of four parts: an analysis of the mental health of teens in the Western world (Part One, which shows a universal decline in mental health that parallels the development of the smartphone); an exploration of why such digital technology is especially harmful for child development (Part Two, which discusses experience-blocking and the over-under-protecting idea); a third part examining four specific harms (social deprivation, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation, and addiction); and finally, a concluding section on concrete proposals for action. These consist of both policy proposals (ban phones in schools, etc.) and suggestions for individual families (delay smartphone and social media use, prioritize in person experiences). Here the Christian analysis temporarily tracks with and then greatly departs from Haidt's suggestions. But, in broad strokes, his diagnosis is spot on: digital life, swallowed uncritically and unreflectively, is harmful for our kids.



Jonathan Haidt. *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2024.

THE TYRANNY OF THERAPY: SHRIER'S ARGUMENT

Investigative journalist Abigail Shrier already deserved our gratitude for her work on the transgender contagion among teenage girls, *Irreversible Damage*.¹ In *Bad Therapy* she faces another social problem affecting children: the rise of “bad therapy,” or a trauma-based, therapeutic mindset that harms rather than helps. Her book is structured around three parts: Part I, “Healers Can Harm;” Part II, “Therapy Goes Airborne;” and Part III, “Maybe There’s Nothing Wrong with Our Kids.” With a little imagination, the basic argument can be deduced from that outline. Part I documents the “iatrogenic” (a technical term from medicine referring to an intervention intended to help that actually harms) effects of counseling in certain circumstances and for certain people. Part II especially deserves Christian parents’ attention, because here Shrier explains how therapy has gone from an isolated phenomenon encountered only in specific cases to a society-wide assumption about what children need. In other words, you’re harming your kids if they *don’t* have a therapist.

But these ideas are, in effect, an alternative catechism instructing our kids in matters of basic human identity and need: You’re a victim. Your emotions always need to be explored. Life is traumatic. You can’t cope without medication or an expert. And, by the continual probing of “have you ever thought of harming yourself?,” suicide is normalized.

In Part III, Shrier gives common sense

¹ See Janie B. Cheaney's review in a previous issue of *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 3.2 (Fall 2021), 116–119.

suggestions for why “normal” struggles are a part of normal life, and floats the countercultural idea that maybe our kids will be fine even if they’re occasionally bullied or sad or depressed (I put “normal” in scare quotes because there’s a vital Christian question to be explored here: who defines “normal”? Can “normal” human experience ever be defined without reference to our Creator? More on that in a moment...).

Shrier isn’t writing from a Christian worldview, but in the end her “solutions” are useful because they’re not all that specific: don’t panic if your kids struggle. Don’t try to spare them all hardship. Don’t think there’s a technique or therapy out there that makes perfect parents who turn out perfect kids. There’s no gospel in those recommendations, but then they’re also not aiming to solve the problems of parenting for all time. In the end, Shrier simply leaves us where previous generations ended up instinctively (more precisely: by God’s common grace): parenting is hard. Kids have to grow up. And (if we don’t interfere with therapies whose goal is to take away all hardship)...they usually do.

HOW THEN SHALL WE PARENT?

So what should Christian parents make of all this? At the most basic level, Haidt and Shrier help us see two influences on our kids with new eyes: smart phones and therapists. That insight alone is a gift. I’ve heard Christian parents describe struggles with their kids — disrespect, depression, laziness, anxiety — and then, in passing, describe life-consuming screen time patterns as though these were unrelated issues. As pastors, ask

these questions in counseling: what is your child’s screentime like? As parents, consider: do teens *need* a smartphone? What does it look like to rightly protect our kids in the digital world? It’s especially worth pondering how we can create more real-world experiences for our kids. As Christians with a belief in the goodness of God’s material creation, we have a theological rationale for helping our kids build, make, play, sweat, explore, and encounter a realm that can’t be entered through a screen. “Taste and see that he is good” doesn’t take place in virtual reality.

The same awareness of the problem is necessary for the constant catechizing, counseling voices speaking to our kids: do we know how many influencers are pursuing our kids — especially those claiming the label of “professional” or “expert”? What are they saying? What model of human identity and purpose lies behind their advice? Shrier is especially helpful for reminding parents of a basic insight of the Christian doctrine of the family: Mom and Dad, *you* are the experts on your kids — not someone with a degree and a resume of professional qualifications. It’s God who gives us our kids to raise for his glory and their eternal good — and it is God who will hold us (not their therapists) accountable for how we pursue that glorious task. Don’t buy the lie that only “experts” can tell you what your kids need. Trusting God’s providence, trusting the sufficiency of Scripture, and pursuing the blessing of local church involvement — we *can* raise our kids for the glory of God.

But that last phrase — “for the glory of God” — can’t be a throwaway line, and

has to affect the way we evaluate even good advice like Haidt and Shrier. They can't become the "experts" to whom we outsource parenting wisdom, either. Their insights also need to be interpreted through a Christian lens. Let me suggest a weakness in both of their arguments that ultimately cannot be answered without God and Scripture.

Jonathan Haidt is an atheist and evolutionary psychologist. In his chapter on "spiritual elevation and degradation," he says this:

Christians ask, "What would Jesus do?" Secular people can think of their own moral exemplar. (I should point out that I am an atheist, but I find that I sometimes need words and concepts from religion to understand the experience of life as a human being. This is one of those times.) (201)

He goes on to explain that "humans evolved to be religious by being together and moving together" (205). With this explanation, Haidt can interpret all moral judgments as ultimately statements of evolutionary intuition: "In other words, we have an immediate gut feeling about an event, and then we make up a story after the fact to justify our rapid judgment — often a story that paints us in a good light" (211). There are no universal moral laws, only moral preferences that can be evaluated for their usefulness, but not their ultimate truth claims. In this system, the only ultimate sin is making anything ultimate. This comes out perhaps most clearly in an aside as Haidt describes a young man he works with who, after struggling with online pornography and gambling gradually "found ways to

moderate his gaming and pornography use" (174). Note the assumption: pornography and gambling are only bad if they become "addictive" — not because of any inherent moral value. Here Haidt's model is explicitly harmful to Christian discipleship — there is no "moderate" use of pornography or gambling!

In practice, what this means is that Haidt can't explain what teens, weaned off their digital devices, are actually meant to live *for*. That chapter on spiritual degradation is God-haunted; Haidt can't get away from the Romans 1 knowledge that there is *something* more to human experience than evolution can explain, and he sees clearly that technology in some way hinders our engagement with a spiritual realm. He even says we have a "God-shaped hole" (215). But he can't admit that the hole is not a generic god-sized hole, but a suppressed knowledge of the one true God. Ironically, his own work tells him why: he has a gut feeling that *that* God can't be allowed into his world without requiring repentance and faith, and so he makes up a story after the fact to explain why humans are merely evolutionary byproducts who make moral judgments and need a god, or an encounter with nature, or something...anything but an acknowledgement that we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We should pray that Haidt turns to the God who is there. We should learn from his descriptions of a very real problem. But we are not merely after "moderating digital addictions" — we want our kids to live, not for or through their devices, but for God and in his world.

That observation points to the weakness in Shrier's work as well. Throughout her

book and the subsequent podcast tour, Shrier repeatedly says that “most” kids don’t need therapy, that some struggle is “normal,” but that certain people (kids and parents) really do need therapy. We could turn that insight around and express the problem this way: according to Shrier, most kids don’t need therapy... unless they do need therapy. It’s normal to struggle, unless your struggles aren’t normal. The vital Christian question is this: what’s “normal?” Anyone familiar with human beings or their own soul knows that yes, some seasons of struggle are more intense than others, and some people have more struggles than others do. Not all human challenges are equal. But that common-sense observation ignores the more vital question that the entire modern therapeutic project cannot answer: what *is* a normal, healthy human being? Is it possible to be a well-adjusted, emotionally balanced human being... who rebels against the living God? As the late David Powlison would say, no system of psychological intervention ever has as its goal a worshipper of the triune God — and so, in the end, every system, carried to its logical end, will only create well-adjusted, socially acceptable idolaters. Shrier is uncomfortable with our therapeutic obsession, but she doesn’t have a clear alternative for problems in life. We do. Therapy and trauma and emotional-social adjustment are inadequate categories to define our kids (and our ourselves) because they ignore the living God, and they disciple us to adjust our lives to an absent God. That *cannot* be our goal as Christian parents.

So here’s my recommendation as we engage both Haidt and Shrier’s work. Learn from the problems they see, because they

are real problems. We are naïve if we suppose ourselves immune from such cultural pathologies. Christian discipleship requires engaging screentime and the catechizing effects of a therapeutic world. But don’t outsource the definition and work of parenting to Haidt, Shrier, or any other voice but God’s. The gospel, revealed in Scripture, lived in the community of the local church, experienced by the power of the Holy Spirit in the application of Christ’s work — *that* is our hope for parenting and our source of all wisdom for life and godliness. ✕

Josh Blount is Pastor of Living Faith Church, Franklin, WV.

REVIEWED BY ANNE KENNEDY

Becoming the Pastor's Wife:

How Marriage Replaced Ordination as a Woman's Path to Ministry

“Oh, so you belong to the youth pastor?” Beth Allison Barr, James Vardaman Endowed Professor of History at Baylor University, remembers the first moment she discovered what it was going to be like to be a pastor's wife. “I don't belong to him,” she corrected the well-meaning church lady who was taking an interest in her life. “Oh, honey,” replied the lady with a knowing wink and a smile, “you belong to him.” Barr “stared at the woman.” She “knew” already that “a wife was often considered a participant in the pastoral job description,” and yet she found it “weird” and “unbiblical.” Moreover, she wonders if this cheerful and, one imagines, kind-hearted woman had “ogled” her fiancé. To be described as “belonging” to him felt, to her, like she would be “his property” (14).

If there is one pervasive theme running through *Becoming The Pastor's Wife: How Marriage Replaced Ordination as a*



Beth Allison Barr, *Becoming the Pastor's Wife: How Marriage Replaced Ordination as a Woman's Path to Ministry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2025.



Woman's Path To Ministry, it would be the assumption that women should live and work independently of men. Dependence, for Barr, portends the abuse and subjugation of women (160). Despite her warnings, those within complementarian ecclesial spaces, the highwater mark of female dependency, continue to use "the Bible to justify privileging male authority." They embrace "a patriarchal system born in white evangelicalism." They "claim to support the spiritual equality of women and men even as they argue that God ordained a gender hierarchy and assigned a permanently subordinate role to women" (1–2).

But, the reader might ask, when were women ever "independent" from men, especially in the church? Barr undertakes to answer that question, sometimes in a most novel fashion. She focuses her research on the apparently "anomalous" role

of the pastor's wife. "Unlike other authoritative roles in church history," she writes, "the role of pastor's wife is not based on leadership skills, ecclesiastical office, or spiritual gifting. It is a role based on a human relationship — marriage. The calling of a husband assumes the calling of his wife" (xviii). This, for Barr, not only violates Holy Scripture but cuts against the historical practice of the church.

Barr believes that women *must* have been ordained to clerical roles in the early church. She finds evidence of single and married women in ministry (41). A married woman in the first and second centuries might "assume a significant spiritual function by assisting her husband in reforming the congregation by serving as a female moral model to the community" (42). Priscilla and Junia, for Barr, are incontrovertible examples of female "leadership" (10–11). Best of all, there is

a peculiar second-century depiction of a woman in the catacombs of Rome with her hands held in the position of prayer usually associated with the Celebrant at the Eucharist, the “orans” position (35). From the early church, Barr moves to the height of the Middle Ages to recount the life and times of Milburga, abbess of Wimnicas in the eighth century. “I’m a medieval historian who studies women and religion,” she explains, “I know that Milburga lived during a time when ordained women were more common and female leadership was not anomalous; a time when abbesses exercised pastoral and political authority over women and men, clergy and nonclergy” (29).

Eventually, as the medieval period drew to its inevitable demise, the Reformation supplanted the independent authority of women in the church by the invention of the pastor’s wife. “I want you to consider how the pastor’s wife role, even while becoming a respectable position for women in the church, could never be more than a mediated role,” she laments, “Beneath the license of a bishop and the trappings of a marriage ceremony, both the priest’s whore and the pastor’s wife are defined by their dependent relationship to a man.” The Reformation could have been a moment of unalloyed freedom for women. “There was no script for the wives of these early Protestant reformers apart from general expectations for godly wives. It’s important to remember that their husbands, formerly celibate clergy, probably had no idea what to expect from them either” (99–100). The moment was lost, however, and most clerical couples, scholars believe, fell into the “two for one” model that even now, she feels, plagues the church.

Barr leaps from the Reformation into the travails of the Southern Baptist Convention through the 1980s and 90s. She is particularly vexed by the prominent position afforded to women like Dorothy Patterson, wife of Paige Patterson and “first lady of Southeastern Seminary” (87). Mrs. Patterson, according to Barr, used all her resources and influence to destroy any possibility of women’s ordination being accepted by the wider denomination. Throughout, Barr weaves in her own testimony of being a pastor’s wife. The pressure to “de-emphasize” her PhD work (50), questions about when she would have another baby (95), the humiliation of being asked to take the youth group girls to a different coffee shop (128), her personal experience is an intolerable burden of accumulated microaggressions. And she is not alone. Women, even today, find themselves putting together the bulletin, teaching Sunday School, and playing the piano for worship. The tasks undertaken by women married to pastors seem to have almost no limit. Except that, whenever she stands up to preach the sermon, the SBC passes yet another vote to prevent her.

It is not within the scope of this review to untangle Barr’s accumulated threads of historical evidence for the ordination of women over the past two thousand years (others will do that well enough). Her argument, however, is undone by a simple word that has no place in the kingdom of God. It is the word “independent.” Variations of it appear only 38 times in the 200 or so pages of the volume, but each time I encountered it, it felt like an acrylic nail across a Sunday School room chalkboard.

One such moment, for example, was her

appeal to the Vestal Virgins of ancient Rome whom, according to scholars, were “legally isolated from their families so that they could function independently.” They “functioned as autonomous leaders who did not need the supervision of men” (18). That may be so, but their “legal isolation” from their own families was so that they could live lives of sacred service to Rome. Perhaps Milburga might be a better example. Her “story shows a time when women’s independent leadership in the church was more normative.” Barr relates that her ministry was “derived from her social status as an elite woman and from her ordination rather than from her dependent status as a wife” (55). Is this really the coup Barr intends? That a very rich woman with brilliant family connections inside a tightly woven ecclesiastical and social fabric used her influence to nurture a celibate monastic community and thereby build up the whole kingdom of God? Such an undertaking could only be successful within generational layers of dependence and belonging. I can’t help but wonder if Milburga would have thought of herself as “independent.” I’m not sure she would have even understood the word.

There is no such thing as “independent leadership” in the kingdom of God. Everyone is subject to the Head, Christ himself, in whom God arranges all the members of his body (1 Cor 12:12). Therefore, human relationships are not characterized by autonomy. The ear can’t say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body” (1 Cor 12:16). A pastor not only relies on other elders and ministers — or in the case of my denomination, a bishop to whom he owes obedience — but he is bound to his own congregation with the

bonds of love. They “belong” to him and he to them, in ways analogous to the way he is bound to his wife if he has one. If she does any work alongside him, she stands in a long line of women who poured themselves out in love, who were grateful to belong to their husbands and the congregations under their care. ✕

Anne Kennedy (MDiv) is the author of Nailed It: 365 Readings for Angry or Worn-Out People (SquareHalo Books, revised 2020). She blogs about current events and theological trends at Preventing Grace on Patheos.com.

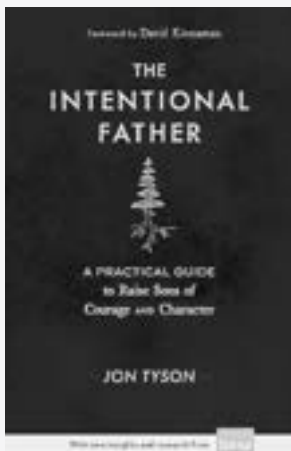
The Intentional Father

As a pastor to many men and a father to four sons, I was eager to read Jon Tyson's *The Intentional Father: A Practical Guide to Raise Sons of Courage and Character*. Tyson knows that "our culture has done a terrible job raising young men, and there is a huge need for formational instruction that will help fathers, and other guardians of young men, intentionally bring their sons from boyhood into manhood" (15).¹ He also knows that fathers matter: "The role of fatherhood is one of the most overlooked yet crucial roles in our society" (19). As Nancy Pearcey has shown in her book, *The Toxic War on Masculinity*, fathers matter to such an extent that "the greatest risk factor for violence and antisocial behavior in boys is growing up *without* a father's presence in their lives."²

Of course, it does little good if a father is

¹ Indeed, a crisis of masculinity has been brewing for so long now that even secular publications have taken note. Consider the following titles found in notable publications: "The Boys Are Not All Right" writes Michael Ian Black in the *New York Times*. "What's the Matter with Men?" wonders Idrees Kahloun for *The New Yorker*. Writing for *Vox*, Sean Illing asks the same question in search of an answer: "What's the matter with men – and how do we fix it?"

² Nancy Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2023), 193, emphasis original. Note that here Pearcey is summarizing a growing body of evidence that shows the active presence of a benevolent father to be the most consistent predictor of a boy's physical, financial, legal, and spiritual wellbeing.



Jon Tyson. *The Intentional Father: A Practical Guide to Raise Sons of Courage and Character*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021.

present while being detached or uninvolved. To be a shaping force for good, Tyson insists that a good father is one who “sees parenting as central to his call before God and does it with all of his might” (33). This is the eponymous “intentional father,” a man who not only models masculinity in his life but also takes deliberate steps to guide his son from boyhood into manhood.

To succeed in this vital undertaking, Tyson recommends several principles and practices that he implemented over many years with his own son. He encourages every father to envision the day when his son(s) will leave the house for good, considering what values and skills he wants his son to take with him. He also asks the reader to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of his own father, giving him a clear picture of what (not) to aim for. Above all, Tyson exhorts

fathers to spend lots of structured time with their sons in order to instill values, form character, and teach all that is necessary for “being good at being a man” (161).

Tyson doesn’t hover 30,000 feet above the ground at the level of abstract principles. He lays out exactly how he guided his son toward manhood through studying Scripture every morning, reading books together, taking special trips, watching films that model positive masculinity, and developing specific skills, like how to have a conversation, how to ask a girl out on a date, how to apply for a job, etc. I found myself nodding in agreement at many points throughout the book as I read about various things I have done with my own sons. But Tyson still taught this middle-aged dog some new tricks, and his book provided a welcome occasion to take inventory of my life and

discern places where I could be even more intentional (Phil 3:12). In my estimation, the book's greatest strength is its passionate call for fathers to take an active role in shaping the lives of their sons, coupled with many practical examples of steps that can be taken toward that end.

Yet no book is without its weaknesses, including *The Intentional Father*. First of all, Tyson's use of Scripture is shockingly scarce for a book aimed at helping sons become more like Jesus (37). I counted one citation of Scripture in the first half of the book — a passing reference to Malachi 4:6 in which the Hebrew word for "fathers" is bewilderingly changed to "parents." (If fathers matter as much as Tyson claims they do, why neuter verses that would seem to lend support to his argument?)

What made Tyson's sparse citation of Scripture even more curious was his frequent use of quotes from a wide array of non-Christian sources, including troubling figures like new age panentheist Richard Rohr. To be sure, all truth is God's truth. And I don't fault a man for quoting non-Christians, as Paul himself did from time to time (Acts 17:28). But it's a bad look, to say the least, when an author quotes men with darkened minds (Eph 4:18) far more often than those who were carried along by the Spirit of God (1 Pet 1:21). If the Lord cares about men (and he does), then surely Tyson could have found more verses that speak to fathers and sons in the pages of holy writ.

Another troubling element of the book involves several questionable suggestions that Tyson strongly encourages his readers to adopt. Some are of debatable benefit (a "gap year" between high school and college), while others are out of reach for all but the most financially well off (Tyson took several extended trips with his son to far flung places for many weeks at a time). Yet some of the recommended practices are bizarre, even spiritually dangerous. For example, Tyson "baptized" his son into manhood in the icy waters of the North Atlantic, and he encourages fathers to sacramentalize their son's thirteenth birthday in similar fashion. He and his son also trekked the Camino de Santiago (the Way of St. James), famous among Catholic mystics who believe the 500-mile pilgrimage promotes spiritual renewal and self-discovery. In addition to lacking scriptural support, such practices appeal to the baser parts of the human heart, which is always searching for liturgy-like formalities (2 Tim 3:5), as if these things mattered more than an ordinary Christian life (Deut 6:4–25).³

Perhaps the greatest weakness of the book, however, is one that strikes at the heart of what Tyson aims to accomplish. Namely, his definition of what it means to be a man is insufficiently masculine. To begin with, the vast majority of Tyson's examples of "broken" masculinity are the abusive kinds found in "toxic masculinity" discourse.⁴ To counter this one-sided picture of masculine failure, Tyson says that "true masculinity... has the strength to smash

³ This emphasis on quasi sacraments of manhood was especially frustrating, given that Tyson faithfully practiced so many of the ordinary means of grace with his son. And I strongly suspect that it was the regular "little" things that he did which had the greatest impact on his son's life, instead of the extraordinary experiences that he emphasizes so much.

⁴ Tyson does approvingly quote Robert Lewis, who writes, "A man accepts responsibility, rejects passivity, leads courageously, and lives for the greater reward" (*Raising a Modern-Day Knight: A Father's Role in Guiding His Son to Authentic Manhood*, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndall, 200y, loc. 836 of 2506, Kindle). But Tyson's warnings against masculine passivity are far, far fewer than those he levels against masculine abuse. This gives the reader the impression that men are much more prone to the latter rather than the former, despite the fact that abdication (not abuse) was the sin of Adam in the garden that plunged humanity into ruin.

hierarchies, stand up for those on the margins, and lead men into lives where they are stopping abuse from happening” (26).⁵ Though stopping abuse is, indeed, one of the duties incumbent on the sex endowed with greater strength (1 Pet 3:7), one could be forgiven for thinking Tyson’s definition of masculinity was taken straight from the latest progressive talking points.

A few pages later, he offers a better definition: “a man is an image bearer and son of God entrusted with power and the responsibility to create, cultivate, care, and defend, for God’s glory and the good of others” (37). There’s nothing objectionable in that, but Tyson has taken the wind out of his sails before he even put them up, stating that most of the content of his book will “apply to young women as well as men” (36).⁶ One is left wondering if the author thinks that sons and daughters need precisely the same formation. Yet if that is so, has he really written a book about raising *sons*?

To be clear, Tyson knows “there are distinct differences between men and women” (42). But he seems hesitant to spell out what those differences are, especially in regards to differing vocations and points of em-

phasis seen throughout the Scriptures.⁷ I suspect this hesitancy stems from Tyson’s egalitarian convictions (he leads a church with several women who serve as pastors, including some who serve as teaching pastors). These seem to hinder his ability to affirm the full range of sexual asymmetry according to the design of God.

Time would fail me to mention other weaknesses of the book, like the concerning way Tyson speaks about disordered sexuality⁸ and his ardent devotion to personality tests as the key to self-knowledge,⁹ so I’ll leave those thoughts to readers of footnotes (may their tribe increase).

In the final analysis, I think *The Intentional Father* is a good book, but not a great one, for it is saddled with some of the modern baggage that the present generation of boys must shed if they are to become the kind of men the world desperately needs. Even so, I think discerning dads who consider Tyson’s advice with humble self-reflection, godly resolve, and a healthy dose of discernment are sure to bless their sons in manifold ways. Let us pray that they do so. We need all the intentional fathers we can get. ✕

⁵ Defining masculinity as the ability to “smash hierarchies” is problematic on many levels. For some hierarchies are simply part of God’s design, such as the authority of humans over animals (Gen 1:28). Indeed, when hierarchy is properly defined as ordered relationships, then a kind of hierarchy would seem to apply to male-female relationships (1 Cor 11:3, 8–9), especially in marriage (Eph 5:22–25) and the church (1 Tim 2:11–12).

⁶ To expand on this point, consider the following: Tyson elsewhere says, “My goal is to help our sons become like Jesus” (37). I want this, too (what Christian father doesn’t?). But aren’t daughters also called to be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom 8:29)? If so, then what sets men apart from women? Why did God make two sexes instead of one? These are questions Tyson never fully answers.

⁷ Consider, for example, how the apostles speak differently about men and women in places like 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, 1 Corinthians 14:26–35, Ephesians 5:22–33, 1 Timothy 2:8–15, 1 Timothy 5:1–16, Titus 2:1–8, and 1 Peter 3:1–7, all of which reflect the differences that Moses first highlights in Genesis 2–3. For more on these differences, see Doug Ponder, “The Harmonious Asymmetry of the Sexes,” *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 6.1 (Spring 2024): 28–40.

⁸ Specifically, Tyson claims that questions about “gay” sons and “transgender boys” are “difficult, complicated questions” and that “the most important thing... is to love and pour into your son” (41). Setting aside the fact that the church across the ages has not found these questions to be all that “complicated,” an essential part of loving others includes exhorting them to embrace, rather than reject, the good designs of God (Gen 1:26–31; Matt 19:4–6). And doing so is *not* “the condemnation of the Pharisees,” as Tyson implies later in the book (157).

⁹ Tyson writes, “Our approach was simple, and it boiled down to this: Nate took any and every personality and skills test I could get my hands on. That’s it” (196). That’s it? *That’s* the thing our sons most need to become the men that God created them to be? One wonders how any father in history ever raised his son(s) before the advent of personality tests, which are barely a century old. For a fuller critique of the tragically common misuse of personality tests, see Doug Ponder, “The Problem with Personality Tests,” *Clear Truth Media*, February 27, 2025, <https://cleartruthmedia.com/s/501/the-problem-with-personality-tests>.

To Change All Worlds



Trueman, Carl. *To Change All Worlds: Critical Theory from Marx to Marcuse*. Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2024.

INTRODUCTION

My family and I recently collected around eight gallons of sap from the maple tree in our backyard. After boiling it all down, we had only a pint or two of maple syrup — it was delicious. While not maple syrup — and not *quite* as tasty — *To Change All Worlds: Critical Theory from Marx to Marcuse* is nonetheless a masterfully concise treatment of almost two hundred years of complex and often enigmatic social thought. Carl Trueman, Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies at Grove City College, has performed the laborious process of “boiling down” gallons of Critical Theory, leaving us with a compelling historical account, reminiscent of his excellent *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. In what follows, I will offer a brief and

selective summary of Trueman's historical work and then offer what I hope is a modest supplement to his overall thesis.

SUMMARY

Trueman begins his history of Critical Theory (henceforth CT) by suggesting what he sees as the central problem with CT, namely its anthropology (5). He lays the philosophical groundwork in the first two chapters with a succinct genealogy spanning a two hundred year period of four thinkers. In the second chapter, Trueman highlights the main contributions of G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) and Karl Marx (1818–1883), then transitions to Karl Korsch (1886–1961) and György Lukács (1885–1971) in Chapter 3. Working through these figures underscores the fundamentally Marxist element of CT, which relies upon an Hegelian, conflict-centered historicism.

We then join Trueman in 1923, so to

speak, as he walks us through the doors of the newly established Institute of Social Research at Goethe University in Frankfurt (i.e., the “Frankfurt School”). Trueman first works out the implications of Max Horkheimer's simple classification of “traditional theory” (e.g. a totalizing system, like Christianity or the Enlightenment) versus “critical theory,” a theory that is active and subversive, uncovering the social conditions which undergird the perpetuation of “traditional theories.” He then summarizes Horkheimer's critique of the Enlightenment (with Theodore Adorno) in Chapter 5, which inculcates the critical (and indeed, familiar) inquiry: Whose interests are being served by any given ideology? And how can we cultivate a revolutionary consciousness to overthrow its privileged oppressors?

Next we meet Theodore Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, in Chapters 6 and 7 respectively. In these men, we discover a major force for the sexual revolution, as well as



a severe critic of the “the cultural industry.” Marcuse’s Marxist appropriation of Freud led him to declare that “sexual codes and theories are...deeply political and embedded in the history of oppression and intimately connected to the way the values of society, with all of its unjust, oppressive structures, are internalized” (173). Adorno, for his part, was not as infatuated with the role sexual pleasure played in revolution, but was absorbed by the way “the culture industry” turned individuals into passive, entertained consumers who, as a result, acquiesce to the status quo (196–202).

Finally, Trueman concludes by offering an analysis of CT, which supplements his insightful postscripts throughout the book (74–77; 108–110; 142–144; 177–180; 212–214). While Trueman is convinced that CT can reveal something of the brokenness of the human condition, he offers a refreshing “No” regarding its potential usefulness as a tool for Christians (222). Now, I anticipate some may quibble with Trueman’s practical proposals, which include an implication that CT “has no stable political loyalties” (223) and that the church’s primary posture should be one of *demonstrating* the authenticity of the Christian faith in the community of the church (76–77; 214; 224–227), given CT’s inhospitable posture toward logic and reasoning. But this in no way should overshadow the usefulness of Trueman’s thorough historical treatment.

Critical Engagement

With that whole-hearted recommenda-

tion and selective summary in hand, I want to shift to defending a modest thesis: while the anthropological crisis in CT is alarming and *completely true*, I want to suggest that there is an even deeper crisis.

An Anthropological Crisis — Yes, But Even Deeper. Trueman ably demonstrates how early CT gave rise to so many contemporary manifestations of anthropological madness, namely queer theory, critical race theory, feminism, transgenderism, the disruption of the nuclear family,¹ and even the brazen attempts to question the rights of parents with their children. So, while one cannot doubt that there is anthropological upheaval at the heart of CT’s revolutionary program, I want to take a moment to point out that there is a subtext in *To Change All Worlds* that points to an even deeper crisis. This crisis in anthropology is *downstream* of a crisis in both metaphysics and epistemology and its inherent striving after a religious worldview.

Metaphysics. Trueman rightly makes much of the *anti-essentialist* impulse originating in Marx’s anthropology (25, 144).² But fundamentally, this is a *metaphysical* claim, which we see picked up by Lukács in his notion of *reification*, that is, “the ascription of objective reality and intrinsic power to things that are really social relations” (62). Reality, in CT, has no inherent structure that might inform our anthropology. There is no authoritative *givenness*, no “grain” to creation which is in our best interest to follow.

¹ One of BLM’s stated goals in 2020 was to “disrupt the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure.” To see an archived version of this statement, visit: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200408020723/https://blacklivesmatter.com/what-we-believe/>. Although BLM removed this statement from their website, it was likely only done to squelch a controversy rather than demonstrate repentance for a false belief. In my judgment, the statements made on that page almost certainly still represent the beliefs of the founders and many self-conscious activists of the BLM movement.

² Karl Marx wrote, in his sixth thesis in *On Feuerbach*, that “the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of social relations.”

Epistemology. And alas, if reality has no objective meaning or essence to discover, outside of social relations, one's theory of knowledge, or *epistemology*, takes a major hit. The epistemological orthodoxy of CT is what we see emerge in Korsch, who abandoned the correspondence theory of truth. Truth is no longer determined by whether a proposition corresponds with the "objective world." Instead, "truth values are determined by whether a particular idea or claim furthers the revolutionary cause" (54). A "revolutionary consciousness" is their goal — one that can "see" (or, in today's sophisticated parlance, is *woke*).

An Alternative Religion. Finally, readers of Trueman's book would benefit from recognizing that, per Bradley Green: "Critical Theory is in effect an alternative theology or religion."³ Aside from its issues with reality and truth, CT's notion of alienation and false consciousness, revolutionary liberation from oppressive ideologies, and eschatological hope in a perfected humanity evince a perversion of almost every Christian doctrine. CT's "historicism and deep suspicion of essentialism prohibits it from articulating a clear anthropology that then prevents it from offering a cogent view of the future in anything more than *hopeful pieties*" (178–179). Simply put, as Christians, we set firmly in place our relation to God as the Creator (metaphysics) and the authority of his revelation (epistemology), which then informs our answers to the "central challenges to human existence identified by the critical theories." All of these are, as Trueman notes, gloriously resolved in

Christ (226). Critical theorists reverse this relationship: their *groundless* anthropology is what shapes their view of fundamental reality, truth, and society. It is therefore a total and purposeful subversion of one's posture to the world. This, I think, is the deeper crisis at play.

Conclusion

In *The City of God*, Augustine describes some of his contemporaries as those "hardened by the habit of contradiction."⁴ In our contemporary context, critical theories are the fashionable contradictions ossifying in Western society. Given Trueman's level-headed and careful exegesis of the primary sources, much of which he describes as "impenetrable gibberish" (114), we should consider this work a treasure. So, if you are looking for a short, go-to introductory guide to grasp the origin and complexities of CT and discover its vivid manifestation in contemporary culture and politics, this book will serve you well. ✕

Robert Lyon is a PhD student in Systematic Theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, where he resides with his wife and three children. He is a member of Hunsinger Lane Baptist Church.

³ Bradley G. Green, "Critical Theory and the Gospel," *American Reformer*, July 26, 2022, <https://americanreformer.org/2022/07/critical-theory-and-the-gospel/>.

⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, 11.1, New Advent, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120102.htm>.

Tell Her Story

INTRODUCTION

Tell Her Story by Nijay Gupta is a recent book defending egalitarianism on the basis that the Bible itself is egalitarian. Though this general argument is decades-old, Gupta gives it new life by systematically contending that many women in the Bible exercised leadership, whether domestically, ecclesiastically, or politically. In Gupta's own words, *Tell Her Story* is "an exercise in amplification" (3). He argues that biblical women have been underappreciated as positive examples of spiritual leadership, and he aims to give them due consideration and honor.

SUMMARY

Gupta sets the stage for his primary argument, that the New Testament pro-



Nijay K. Gupta, *Tell Her Story: How Women Led, Taught, and Ministered in the Early Church*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023.

vides many examples of women leading in homes and in churches, by claiming that both the Old Testament and the early church's surrounding Jewish and Roman cultures provided antecedents for women leading in the early Christian movement. He first discusses Deborah, a prophetess who also provided political leadership during Israel's early history as a nation. He then claims that Adam and Eve were equal partners in the Garden of Eden before sin tainted male-female relationships. Finally, Gupta shows that, though both first-century Jewish and Roman cultures were patriarchal, some women did provide leadership in their homes and in society. Within these contexts, Gupta contends that Jesus' female followers (especially his mother, Mary, and Mary Magdalene) were influential over his male disciples. Drawing especially from Colossians 4:15, Philemon 1:1, and Romans 16, Gupta then argues that some women were deacons, overseers, and even elders in early churches. Finally, in two appendices, Gupta answers objections to his thesis that may be raised from 1 Timothy 2:11–15 and the New Testament household codes (Col 3:18–4:1; Eph 5:22–33; 1 Pet 3:1–6).

CRITICAL EVALUATION

Throughout *Tell Her Story*, Gupta writes clearly and compellingly in an appropriate tone, as an experienced professor who wants to help his readers appreciate women's leadership according to the Bible. However, the egalitarian interpretation of the New Testament in this book is unconvincing for at least three reasons.

First, logical fallacies pervade this book. Gupta occasionally makes hasty general-

izations. Deborah's prophetic and political leadership of Israel in Judges 4–5 is a singular example of a woman leading in Old Testament Israel. Later, Gupta provides evidence of high-class Roman women sometimes having a measure of financial independence from their husbands or having managerial status within their households. Yes, there were "actual women who held positions of authority and power ... who found ways to circumvent certain cultural rules and expectations" (6). But possibility does not amount to probability or actuality. Gupta also often constructed straw men with which to argue. He asks, "Did Jesus have women disciples?" (62). No complementarian denies that women followed Jesus. Gupta later says, "Women populate Scripture as examples of faith and obedience" (154). Everyone agrees that Scripture speaks highly of both men and women of faith. As a final example, consider how Gupta heads one section of his conclusion: "Paul saw no deficiency of intellect, skill, or morality in women" (158). Gupta's historical and exegetical observations pose no problem to a complementarian reading of Scripture. His conclusion that early New Testament churches were egalitarian does not follow from these statements. Logical fallacies such as these hinder this book's argument receiving a warmer reception.

Second, Gupta's arguments that women led and taught in the early church are speculative. As Gupta begins to discuss Romans 16, the single chapter he treats most extensively, he makes multiple speculative assertions about Romans 16 without any supporting evidence: "Paul was explicitly commending women's ministry and leadership The casual



intermixture of male and female names (some couples, some singles or widows), and the general terminology used to describe their ministry work, point to a nongendered conception of leadership” (98–99). He jumps from calling Mary “one of the founding members of the Roman church” to saying, “it is not a stretch of the imagination to think that Mary was a leading elder at Rome” (101). A church may have many founding members, but almost all of them are not its elders, either initially or later. Finally, Gupta assumes that Lydia, as a householder in Philippi, would have been an overseer of the Philippian church, since she, lacking a husband, would have been overseer of her household (104). Gupta’s many speculations weaken the force of his overall argument.

Third, the broad egalitarian reading Gupta proposes for the Bible is some-

times self-contradictory. As an example of the underappreciation of female heroes of the faith, Gupta claims, “It is a curiosity to me that Hebrews mentions Barak but not Deborah (Heb 11:33). I can only assume that Hebrews was especially identifying warriors trained for battle” (10n2). To downplay a biblical author’s appreciation of women, Gupta here fails to observe that both Sarah and Rahab are commended in the “hall of faith” (Heb 11:11, 31). Later, Gupta says, “I find it incredibly clarifying to look at specific *people* in God’s good news story and how the biblical writers actually reflect on those people” (153). Isn’t the premise of his book that these women were underappreciated — even in Scripture — and that he must reconstruct their significance based on scant evidence? Other times, Gupta contradicts the Bible itself. He claims, “Paul did not seek to restrict women in terms of leadership

or the wielding of power,” as Paul was “a ministry pragmatist” (49). This statement directly contradicts 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 (which Gupta never engages) and 1 Timothy 2:11–15, as well as the many texts in which Paul proves himself rather impractical by worldly standards. Finally, Gupta’s treatment of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 itself is self-defeating. Gupta endorses Cynthia Westfall’s scholarship on the key term *authenteo* (1 Tim 2:12), that this verb “expresses abuse of power, not neutral or positive use of power” (172). He considers Paul to be forbidding women to abuse power over men in first-century Ephesus. Let us grant this definition of *authenteo*. Even if *authenteo* only refers to the abuse of power, in Paul’s worldview, any exercise of authority by a woman over men within the church is a usurpation of authority, a wrong use of authority, because that authority is not hers to use at all. The definition of *authenteo* proposed by Westfall and Gupta does not, in fact, support egalitarianism. Gupta’s book shows that an egalitarian interpretation of Scripture continues to be self-contradictory and impossible to square with all the biblical data regarding the roles of men and women within the church.

CONCLUSION

Gupta has succeeded in his stated goal to amplify the narratives about women leaders of the Bible. However, as one reads, the amplification is so loud that it degenerates into distortion. In *Tell Her Story*, Gupta has turned the volume up too high on biblical women, such that his speculations regarding their leadership functions in the early church fail to be persuasive to those not already agree-

ing with his egalitarian presuppositions. *Tell Her Story* helpfully catalogs standard egalitarian arguments for a biblical basis for the equal roles of men and women in the church, but complementarians have already biblically refuted all these claims. ✕

Jordan Atkinson, a PhD candidate in Biblical Studies from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, pastors Friendship Baptist Church in Harveysburg, OH. He lives in nearby Wilmington with his wife and children.

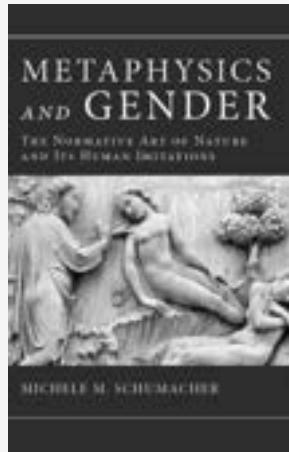
Metaphysics & Gender

INTRODUCTION

In *Metaphysics and Gender: The Normative Art of Nature and Its Human Limitations*, Michele Schumacher provides readers with theological and philosophical tools for evaluating and engaging the current discussion surrounding gender and the attendant philosophies that reject the nature-art paradigm found in the classical philosophical tradition most clearly embodied in the writings of Aristotle and Aquinas. In what follows, I offer a summary of her work, a brief analysis, and three ways her writing can benefit Protestant ethics.

SUMMARY

In chapter one, Schumacher begins by outlining the present state of medical



Michele Schumacher. *Metaphysics and Gender: The Normative Art of Nature and Its Human Limitations*. Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023.

practices and the altering of human sex. She examines the widely known cases of Bruce Jenner and Bruce Reimer. Jenner altered his body after a successful career as a male athlete, and Reimer was raised as a girl after a botched circumcision that led to a sex-reassignment surgery before the age of two. Schumacher also assesses the medical industry by depending upon the work of Paul R. McHugh, former psychiatrist-in-chief at Johns Hopkins who helped put an end to their practice of sex-reassignment surgery, as well as the gender care practices and studies of Boston Children's Hospital and Massachusetts General Hospital. Schumacher helpfully outlines the problems with contemporary studies on gender care. She faults their methodology, narrow control group, and brief follow-up time (27). When one rightly accounts for these factors, as the study performed in 2011 by the Karolinska Institute in Sweden, one notes that patients who had surgeries suffer mental disorders approximately ten years after their surgeries and have a suicide rate "twenty times above that of the general (non-transgendered) population" (20).

If the first chapter outlines the current cultural phenomena of sex-reassignment, the second introduces readers to the theory of gender proposed by Judith Butler as an underlying philosophy that can explain the phenomena. Schumacher differentiates Butler's position from Simone de Beauvoir, showing how the two differ on where construction begins. On the one hand, Beauvoir maintained that sex was natural and gender was constructed through performance. According to Beauvoir, one can become woman even if one is not naturally female. On the other hand, Butler moves construction back a

step. Gender becomes a verb that gives rise to sexed nature. Here, we see the reversal of classic theology, which maintains that God's eternal idea of all things is expressed in nature and man receives nature as impressed upon him. Instead, there is no God, and no nature that precedes the human idea of all things. No longer does God impress upon creation; rather, man impresses his ideas upon nature. In the end, sex is as fluid as gender.

Chapter three presents a different philosophical picture of reality. Instead of seeing nature as arising from within a sociological construct through gendering, as Butler maintains, Schumacher offers an Aristotelian-Thomistic (henceforth, A-T) account of nature and art, wherein nature is a given of reality that norms art. Schumacher uses the term "art" in the classical sense as that which is produced by a rational creature using matter from nature and respecting "nature's *own* (i.e., intrinsic) orientation or purposefulness" through imitation (46). The telos or inclination of a given nature reveals the good which perfects it. Art respects this telos as that which is ruled and measured by nature. Butler effectively reverses this philosophy. There is no nature except that which arises within a social construct, meaning that nature is an artifact of man.

Having articulated the differences between Butler and the A-T metaphysic, Schumacher examines the relationship between freedom and essence in chapter four. The A-T account insists that freedom follows from essence and is for the good that completes or perfects our nature. Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre sees this view of freedom as bondage since our essence determines what is good for us, which is

a form of constraint. To be free, our freedom must precede our essence so that we can consciously choose what we are. Our desires are chosen by us, not given in nature. However, Sartre quickly encounters a problem, for we are not alone. Others also choose their freedom and, in order to respect this freedom, we must be willing to be manipulated by others as those who also manipulate. The sexual act most explicitly demonstrates this reality as one either makes the other an object or is made an object for the other. One is either the sadist or the masochist. This leads Schumacher to “second wave” trans-theorist Andrea Long Chu (75). Chu argues that gender is not a social construct that arises from our desires, contra first wave theorists. Instead, gender is given to us, not in nature, but in the desire of others such that we receive gender as those who seek to be desired. We all long to be desired, thus we are all miserable females, for to be female is to be miserable as one seeks to meet the desire of those who have chosen for us. Freedom is lost.

Chapter five weds the nature-art paradigm and its reversal in the “*trans-ing* of human biology” (106). Schumacher asserts that IVF began as an attempt to preserve biological parenting but has, in fact, continued to undermine the normative process of begetting children in favor of making them by producing offspring through art rather than receiving them in nature. Bodies and their function are no longer required, allegedly, because art can produce what was once only available through nature, especially for those who have “transformed” their nature by means of art. Schumacher paints a bleak picture of reality and its trajectory as she discusses uterus transplants for men who identify as trans women, pregnant women who give birth as legal

fathers, three-parent embryos, uniparents, and compulsory screenings required by insurance companies as one determines which embryos to implant.

The final chapter further presents the consequences of inverting the nature-art paradigm. Schumacher begins with the speculative intellect upon which reality is impressed or informed and the practical intellect by which one impresses form upon matter, making art. Butler reverses the theoretical and practical intellect because everything is about doing or gendering as one constructs reality. Butler follows Sartre here. Essence is chosen. However, Schumacher notes that Sartre’s view of freedom renders one either the sadist or the masochist, and this is where Chu and the problem of language emerge. One cannot merely create their own essence by an act of freedom, for the essence created must be received and confirmed by the intellect and language of others in order to receive validation and confirmation of change. Society must give gender to you. Here again, we are all passive recipients acted upon by society, which places all of us in the existential position of female because we must be recognized as the object of another’s consciousness. This is why silence is violence. Schumacher offers a brief conclusion at the end of her work with a plea to respect the nature-art paradigm given by God.

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Schumacher is to be applauded for writing a very clear, albeit dense, work that clearly articulates the theology and philosophy of the nature-art paradigm and the consequences of rejecting it as found in the work of Sartre, Beauvoir, and Butler. She

traces philosophical ideas, provides a robust counter proposal rooted in an A-T metaphysic, engages medical and sociological studies, and includes several examples from popular culture. I heartily recommend this work to students of philosophy and theology with an interest in contemporary debates surrounding gender.

THE BENEFIT OF SCHUMACHER'S WORK

There are three particular ways I believe Schumacher's work can benefit Protestant ethics for the better. First, Schumacher operates within the confines of the natural law tradition, and this forces readers to question the validity of her approach. I, for one, share great affinity for this tradition and am grateful for the work of David VanDrunen, Andrew Walker, and David Haines and Andrew Fulford who have recently helped revive natural law in Protestant circles.¹ Although differences

exist among these thinkers, I am hopeful that further conversation about these matters will benefit Protestants. Schumacher's work is an example of how one sympathetic to the natural law tradition could employ her argumentation or at least reason with the philosophical and theological foundation from which she builds.

Second, Schumacher helps us rightly think about teleology and inclination. When we speak of teleology or purpose and inclination, we usually refer to the intentions of our mind, but Schumacher shows us that inclination precedes mind and is rooted in human nature. Human nature is oriented toward the true and the good in body and soul prior to any determination of the intellect. The purposes of the mind are normed by the inclinations of our nature. Although one might feel inclined or oriented to a particular sex or gender, these inclinations are normed by the human na-

¹ David VanDrunen, *Natural Law: A Short Companion* (Brentwood TN: B&H Academic, 2023). Andrew Walker, *Faithful Reason: Natural Law Ethics for God's Glory and Our Good* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2024). Haines, Haines and Andrew Fulford, *Natural Law: A Brief Introduction and Biblical Defense* (Moscow, ID: Davenant Institute, 2017).



ture and cannot be reduced to the choice of the individual or the community. The teleology of human nature ought to be measured in the same way that triangles, squirrels, and trees are measured. First, we discern what the essence in question is. Then, understand how this particular instantiation of a nature ought to be and discern the ends that complete it. For rational creatures, such as humans, the ends that perfect our nature ought to be pursued in the same way that a non-rational squirrel ought to bury and find nuts. Our nature, as well as the squirrel's, is given to us and by it we are oriented toward the true and the good. As Schumacher reminds us throughout her work, we act from our nature to produce art, and both our nature and the art produced are measured and ruled by the eternal law of God.

Third, Schumacher offers a helpful way to think about creaturely freedom. God endows creatures with natures that are oriented toward particular and fitting ends. This enhances, rather than restricts, freedom. Schumacher traces how this idea is lost in the thought of Sartre who argues that choice precedes essence, in Butler who maintains that sex and gender arise within a social construct by determination, and in Chu who laments the lack of freedom as we become the object of the other's consciousness and desires. Instead of assuming that our nature constricts our freedom, Schumacher argues freedom is for the good. Our natural inclinations foster true freedom as they guide us to the ends that complete us. When humans determine to become the sole arbiters of freedom by inverting the nature-art paradigm, they either end up competing for freedom in a zero-sum game, as Sartre suggests when he asserts that we are either

the sadist or the masochist, or we despair like Chu because all freedom is lost.

CONCLUSION

Schumacher elegantly paints a picture of reality wherein God is the maker and measurer of all things as revealed in the nature-art paradigm. God impresses reality unto mankind and orders all life toward the good. When man rejects this paradigm and asserts that no nature exists except what we make of it, everything becomes art and nothing is stable. Man takes the place of God and seeks to express his identity upon fellow man. Freedom is compromised and despair follows. There is a better way. We ought to choose in accord with our given nature and pursue that to which our nature is inclined as we are measured by the One who made us. ✕

Drew Sparks resides in Terre Haute, Indiana, where he serves as Pastor of Trinity Reformed Baptist Church and Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at Ivy Tech Community College. Drew also serves as an Adjunct Professor of Theology at the International Reformed Baptist Seminary and is a ThM Advisor at Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary. He received a B.A. from Lancaster Bible College, an M.A. (Christian Apologetics) from Veritas International University, and a ThM (Philosophy) and PhD (Systematic Theology) from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has authored several articles and contributed chapters to various books. He is also a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and the Evangelical Philosophical Society.

Masculinity

INTRODUCTION

When a sitting United States Senator writes a book, it deserves consideration. When that book focuses on biblical manhood, Christians especially should pay attention. Josh Hawley, senior Senator from Missouri, has written such a book. *Manhood: The Masculine Virtues America Needs* is Hawley's effort to help men become who God created them to be. His proposed path forward follows the themes of Scripture, primarily God's created order and calling. Using Scripture as his guide, Hawley's "hope is that in telling again these Adam stories, we will find our own story written there and discover new vision for our lives" (13).



Josh Hawley, *Manhood: The Masculine Virtues America Needs*. Washington D.C.: Regnery, 2023.

SUMMARY

Known primarily for taking on “Big Tech,” Josh Hawley sets his focus on another pervasive problem in America — the struggle of men. As the culture has waged war against “toxic masculinity,” it has tragically communicated that any vestige of biblical masculinity must be opposed. This war on masculinity has produced devastating consequences. Drug usage, suicide, and crime rates have dramatically increased among men in America in recent years. Society has emasculated men, leading to their loss of purpose and apathy towards holding steady jobs or getting married. “All is not well with men in America. And that spells trouble for the American republic,” Hawley writes (6).

Hawley’s book is divided into two parts, pointing men to hope and purpose. In Part I, Hawley lays the foundation for identifying the ideal expressions of manhood while also warning against its current threats. He begins by following the theme of manhood throughout Scripture. Starting with God’s created order in Genesis, Hawley considers key biblical figures as models of masculinity. Hawley points to Adam, Abraham, Joshua, David, and Solomon as examples and counterexamples of masculinity.

Drawing from his historical and political background, Hawley also draws a parallel of what he has identified as the greatest historical threat to masculinity: Epicureanism. The Greek philosopher, Epicurus (d. 270 B.C.) believed that humanity ought to live solely for self-pleasure and fulfillment: “Happiness is all that matters, on Epicurus’s view, and this present life is all there is: no immortal soul, no great beyond, none of that” (27). Pointing to modern liberalism, Hawley

warns against modern Epicureanism that minimizes manhood and enshrines selfishness with thinking that says, “To be happy, to become authentic, you must become the author of your own self” (41).

Part II of *Manhood* identifies the biblical titles given to men, while warning against the corresponding Epicurean lies. The Bible calls men to the roles of husband, father, warrior, builder, priest, and king. Each of these roles is presented through examples in Scripture, while modern Epicurean liberalism beguiles “men to forgo leadership responsibility and to pursue self instead” (51). Hawley’s overall argument is that America’s health depends on the spiritual health of men. America will only be great once men turn away from Epicurean liberalism and back to biblical truth: “America’s most urgent need politically is not for this or that piece of legislation. It is for men to embrace the call to character, the call to what Theodore Roosevelt termed, ‘righteousness’” (202).

CRITICAL INTERACTION

Josh Hawley’s *Manhood* is an astoundingly unique work from a sitting United States politician. He unashamedly not only exegetes Scripture but also builds an entire theological understanding of masculinity from the biblical narrative. *Manhood* considers masculinity from a decidedly biblical position and directs men to essential biblical principles.

Manhood highlights all that is good and necessary about God’s intended design of manhood. Hawley encourages men to a better purpose and calling than culturally accepted selfishness. He calls men to reclaim the goodness of taking responsibility, being

leaders, and serving a purpose greater than themselves. The world needs strong men to do good for others, for “We were born, each of us, to spread the light, feeding it on the kindling of our lives. We were born to have the character of a warrior” (126).

Perhaps the strongest contribution of Hawley’s book is his ability to motivate and inspire men to action. He gives men hope that they were created for a good purpose, to live a meaningful life, and to leave a positive legacy. In a cultural milieu that minimizes strong, biblical masculinity, it is refreshing to hear affirmation of this good calling: “Choose an evil in your life and drive it back. When you retake ground, hold it” (118). Hawley’s book is a helpful resource that points men to the practical roles and functions God has given them. *Manhood* excels both in warning against cultural threats and lionizing biblical principles for men.

While *Manhood* is recommended as a practical resource for men, it falls short in one key area: the gospel. Though Hawley lauds Old Testament patriarchs, he misses the greatest demonstration of masculinity in Christ himself. Only twice in the Epilogue does Hawley mention Jesus (208 and 210–211), and only then is he referred to as “Man,” never by name. While Scripture drives Hawley’s case for masculinity, at times he can come across relying too heavily on man’s ability. At multiple points, Hawley comes close to implying God depends on men to accomplish his will. Hawley writes, “Indeed, David’s work makes him a partner with God” (134) and “man brings God *to the world*” (155).

Christians are mindful that God does indeed call men to faithfulness, but any

human ability is dependent on the Lord’s provision and strength. Men were created for masculine roles as Hawley identifies in the Old Testament patriarchs, but man’s ability to fulfill these callings is solely dependent on God’s faithfulness rather than human dedication. Scripture calls us not to depend on our own strength but instead to trust fully in the Lord (Prov 3:5–6). The biblical calling of godly manhood emanates from Christ’s accomplished work on our behalf (Eph 5:25–33). Biblical masculinity proceeds from the gospel.

CONCLUSION

Josh Hawley’s *Manhood* is an impressive book from a politician that points men in the right direction. All men will benefit from following the biblical principles explained in this book. The book is easily readable, filled with enjoyable anecdotes, and helps explain why our culture has revolted against biblical masculinity. I recommend this book as a useful resource to understand the practical applications of biblical manhood. However, discerning readers should note the book’s limitations in failing to apply the gospel. Without God’s redemptive work and strength, our best efforts to reclaim manhood will fall woefully short. Men of all stripes need the gospel to inspire, motivate, and empower their pursuit of masculinity. America’s most pertinent need is for men to treasure Jesus above all else and faithfully follow their biblical calling. What American men need now more than ever is Jesus, the only true and perfect Man. ✕

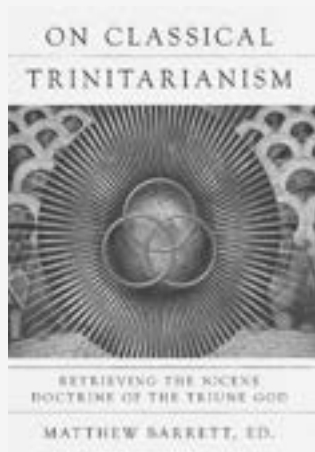
Jeremiah Greever is the Senior Pastor at First Baptist Church of Sedalia, MO. He also serves as an adjunct professor at Missouri Baptist University, is the committee co-chair for the Founders Midwest Conference, and has authored two books, The Biblical Man and The Biblical Woman.

On Classical Trinitarianism:

Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God

Over the last fifteen years there has been a renewed interest in trinitarian doctrine. This has led to various intramural debates within evangelical circles, some of which have generated more heat than light. Through these debates, doctrines such as divine simplicity, inseparable operations, and divine incomprehensibility have received renewed attention among evangelical scholars and students. This is a welcome development.

In the midst of this recovery and re-assertion, Matthew Barrett, professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, has been one of the more prolific writers and spokesmen for classical theism. In perhaps his most significant contribution to date, he has edited *On Classical Trinitarianism*. This work, not



Matthew Barrett, Ed. *On Classical Trinitarianism: Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God*. Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 2024.

incidentally timed to coincide with the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, intended as a resource for future generations, is both a positive statement of classical trinitarianism and a response to the widespread movement toward social trinitarianism, a theological virus which has infected not simply the liberal academy, but also the evangelical theological establishment.

The volume is quite comprehensive and has a wide variety of authors. Multi-author volumes, because of their unevenness and range of perspectives, demand a thorough, careful chapter-by-chapter analysis.

That is not the intent of this review. Rather, its intent is to raise questions that arise from the assumptions of the book. The questions relate to the inclusion, within the trinitarian retrieval movement, of certain theological positions and assumptions.

When we examine both the earliest days of the church and the later mature expressions of Trinitarian dogma, it is clear that there was a constellation of assumptions held by those who articulated the doctrine of God faithfully. Barrett recognizes this as a key feature of any modern retrieval movement, and he addresses these assumptions at the outset:

Moreover, theologians East and West understood that precommitments were instrumental in pro-

fessing the creed according to its patristic intentions. Some of these precommitments were hermeneutical...Some of these precommitments were metaphysical...Some of these precommitments were theological...Some of these precommitments were canonical.¹

Barrett goes on to articulate how these precommitments functioned in the early centuries of the church:

The hermeneutical, metaphysical, theological, and canonical precommitments of pro-Nicene trinitarianism may have created many strands, but together they formed a rope that could weather the storm...Confessing the Nicene Creed did not function according to any set of precommitments, but the church fathers endowed churches with those precommitments necessary to interpret and propagate the creed's content in a way most faithful to the scriptural witness.²

Barrett contrasts these precommitments with the species of modern theology against which he is arguing: "Modern theology's revival has forfeited many of classical trinitarian theism's precommitments, precommitments necessary to maintain Nicaea's full integrity."³

This is undeniably true. But, by framing his volume in this way, Barrett also underscores one of the central challenges

¹ *On Classical Trinitarianism: Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God*, Matthew Barrett, ed (Downer's Grove, IVP, 2024) xix [italics in original].

² Barrett, *On Classical Trinitarianism*, xx [italics in original].

³ Barrett, *On Classical Trinitarianism*, xxii.

of his project. Retrieval cannot simply consist of echoing orthodox answers or correcting modern theological errors. Rather, by Barrett's own criteria, real trinitarian retrieval involves embracing both the answers and the structures of thought embedded in the early Christian witness to the Triune God.

This raises several questions about the current retrieval movement of which Barrett's book is representative. While the volume is presented as an attempt to represent the current retrieval movement, Barrett's efforts at codifying this retrieval in fact reveal important fissures in the movement itself.

ROMAN CATHOLIC RETRIEVAL?

One of these is the prominent inclusion of Roman Catholic scholars in the project. There are vast differences between Roman Catholic and Protestant theology on a range of issues. With respect to classical theism, one might raise questions about canonical precommitments, or perhaps about the precise understanding of the inseparable operations of the Triune God in the salvation of man.

But on this we should note that, in the early Protestant efforts at retrieval, both patristic and medieval categories were often employed — not uncritically, but nevertheless positively. As Muller notes, “The early orthodox development of Reformed trinitarianism assumes the appropriation of patristic norms in confessional documents and is characterized by a flowering of large-scale



theological treatments of doctrines like Trinity and Person of Christ.”⁴

As the Reformation spread, newer trinitarian heresies needed combating. The Reformers and those who followed became increasingly comfortable not only with patristic definitions, but also with later medieval ones. Despite some initial reluctance, both the patristic and the medieval trinitarian formulations were heavily adopted among Protestants, even in their mature confessional documents. There were caveats: as Muller notes, Protestant exegesis since the sixteenth century rooted its arguments and terminology more firmly in the text of Scripture.⁵ But Muller nonetheless summarizes, “The documents and the dogmatic queries of the Reformation, therefore, stand in a direct and positive relationship to the later development of a traditional or classical trinitarian theory by the Protestant orthodoxy.”⁶ In fact,

⁴ Richard A. Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol 4: *The Trinity of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 61.

⁵ Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 62.

⁶ Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 71.



in early Protestant retrieval, much of the patristic and medieval framework regarding theology proper was retained.

FEMINIST RETRIEVAL?

But what about the inclusion of feminist theology? Does this not exceed the boundaries? How is it possible for a modern retrieval movement centered around the doctrine of God to flourish if there is significant hermeneutical disagreement, disagreement on the names of God, or disagreement on God's self-revelation of Jesus Christ?

In Amy Peeler's chapter, "The Need for Nicene Exegesis," we are reminded of just these questions. In her chapter, Peeler argues against the position of Eternal Functional Subordination on both exegetical and theological grounds, only lightly employing her redefinition of the implications of the language of fatherhood. On

one level, this is entirely in keeping with the premise of the retrieval project. Eternal Functional Subordination sits uneasily with the classical doctrine of God. But Peeler's work sits quite uneasily as well.

Peeler's most notable contribution to the doctrine of God is her 2022 volume, *Women and the Gender of God*. In her book, she explicitly attempts to bring together the conclusions of modern gender studies with the doctrine of God — a significant hermeneutical departure from the classical tradition.

Her conclusions are also theologically novel. To cite merely one example, in her discussion of eternal generation — surely an important facet of classical trinitarianism — she advocates for multivalent ways of describing the Father's generation of the Son.⁷ In this respect, she positively cites Jürgen Moltmann in his "radical denial of patriarchal monotheism."⁸ Then, along the same lines, Peeler affirms Kathryn Tanner's suggestion of the use of "gender-bending gender imagery" when referring to God, and concludes, "Addressing the personal and eternal divine source as 'Parent' rather than 'Father' may more correctly name the relationship."⁹

It is hard to imagine how this fits with any classical formulations of the generation of the Son; still less with the consistent testimony of Jesus himself or of the names of God in the rest of Scripture. These are not incidental details. Peeler's theological work has, as one of its aims, undermining a masculine view of God.¹⁰

⁷ Amy Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 2022) 100.

⁸ Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 100.

⁹ Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 100-101.

“retrieving classical trinitarianism involves more than simply stacking up decent answers to discrete questions.”

This is, to put it mildly, a world away from the stated precommitments of classical theological renewal. It is an example of a vastly different, far more glib, way of conceiving of theology proper — a way that would lead someone to write, “That God is Parent or Mother, and not only Father, helps to work against the ‘phallacy’ that God is male.”¹¹ It is equally difficult to conceive of orthodox precommitments regarding metaphysics that encompass the “fruitful possibility” that Jesus Christ could have been intersex.¹²

Precommitments Matter

Barrett’s book is largely to be welcomed. But care must be exercised in who is identified and placed at the foreground of the retrieval movement which it represents. We cannot forget that retrieving classical trinitarianism involves more than simply stacking up decent answers to discrete questions. The precommitments will always matter. A range of hermeneutical,

metaphysical, and anthropological ideas must always be in view.

Barrett, to his credit, acknowledges this in his Introduction. There he looks to the spirit of our fathers:

Ultimately, our aspiration is renewal, the kind that recovers the spirit of our fathers...For we are not concerned with imitating a Trinity remade in our image but contemplating the beauty of the Infinite to participate in the eternal life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹³ ✕

Jonathan Master is President of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

¹⁰ Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 112.

¹¹ Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 17.

¹² Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 140 [neologism in original].

¹³ Barrett, *On Classical Trinitarianism*, xxxiv.

eikon

*Know that the LORD
Himself is God;
It is He who has made
us, and not we ourselves;
We are His people and the
sheep of His pasture.*

PSALM 100:A3, NASB



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