Alastair Roberts tunes us in to the theology of gender in Genesis 1 & 2

This article is taken from issue 03 of Primer, entitled True to Form. The issue explores gender and sexuality, and alongside this article by Alastair Roberts includes contributions from Sam Allberry, Sharon James, Pete Sanlon, Peter Saunders, Ed Shaw and Robert S. Smith.

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Although the Scriptures address the topic of the sexes on many occasions, it is within the opening chapters of Genesis that its foundational treatment of the subject is to be discovered. That so much of the fundamental teaching on the subject of the sexes is contained within the first two chapters of the Bible is itself an initial indication of just how closely entwined this subject is with the scriptural narrative more generally, and how important a theme it must be for any theology that faithfully arises from it. The more closely we attend to the text of Genesis 1-2, the more apparent it will be that gendered themes are subtly diffused throughout.

Yet the foundation offered by Genesis 1-2 may initially appear unpromising in some respects. As a more literary and poetic narrative text, it does not present the same robust propositional statements that we find in such places as the Pauline epistles. Those searching for clear theological propositions may rummage around in the packing chips of narrative and come up with relatively little reward for their efforts. Not only do literary readings of narrative texts demand very sensitive and delicate forms of interpretation, they also seem much more vulnerable to contestation. Without definitive propositional statements, such passages seem considerably less serviceable for direct theological controversy, which has provoked the majority of the writing on this subject over the last couple of decades. The strength of a literary reading is seldom as straightforward as the strength of a logical argument. The former is incapable of forcefully securing assent: if and when it persuades, it does so through its elegance, fittingness, and attractiveness. To those who refuse to be persuaded and insist upon reading a text against its grain for their own purposes, it may present little challenge.

There are, however, advantages to building our theology upon such a foundation. As much of the theological teaching of Scripture is conveyed through subtle literary means, any approach that attends closely to narrative will be much more securely grounded. It also offers a considerably broader base than many doctrinal arguments, which depend upon a few heavy load-bearing texts for support. Such literary readings can expose the hidden root systems of biblical teachings in scriptural narratives, revealing how deeply embedded in the text certain claims are, and the impossibility of removing them without considerable violence. Although a theological case established upon such a literary reading may be lightly dismissed, it can only truly be answered by a more sensitive and attentive reading of the passages in question. It is precisely at this point, rather than in the clash of competing propositions and their arrayed battalions of proof-texts, that the weaknesses and flaws of unscriptural positions often emerge, as they fail to offer a compelling reading of the Scriptures in their breadth.
A literary reading must be alert to the use of metaphor, to subtle intertextual echoes, to the significance of narrative progressions and patterns, to characterisation, and other such factors. Much scriptural teaching on the sexes, as on other subjects, is conveyed through such artful literary means. Not every detail of such a reading is equally robustly supported by the text and some of my remarks in what follows may drift into more speculative readings of suggestive details. However, the accuracy and theological import of more salient points can be made more explicit by the presence of many supporting literary details throughout the passages in question, spreading the weight of the text’s teaching, rather than focusing it entirely on a few proof-texts.

The Pattern of Creation in Genesis 1

The creation and blessing of man and woman in Genesis 1 is part of the wider creation narrative and ought to be viewed against that backcloth. In the course of six days God creates, structures, names, establishes generation, fills, and delegates rule over the heavens and the earth. These six days naturally divide into two halves, with the first three days and the second three days each involving different sorts of tasks, while corresponding to each other in their sequence.

Days one to three (verses 1-13) are days of structuring, division, taming, and naming. These creation days address the first problem with the original creation: that it is without form (cf. verse 2). On day one, God creates the light, divides light from darkness, and names them Day and Night. On day two, God creates the firmament, dividing the waters above from the waters below, and calls the firmament Heaven. On day three, God gathers together the waters, so that the dry land appears, dividing the one from the other. He calls the dry land Earth and the gathering of the waters he calls Seas. These days involve the establishment of stable regions with their boundaries.

Days four to six (verses 14-31) are days of generating, establishing succession, filling, glorifying, and establishing communion. On day four we return to the division of light from darkness and day from night, as God places the sun, moon, and stars in the firmament to provide light on the earth and to uphold the division of day from night. On day five, the waters above and below are populated as God empowers the waters to bring forth living creatures and causes birds to fly across the face of the firmament expanse. On day six, the earth – divided from the seas on the third day – is also empowered to bring forth living creatures. These three creation days answer the second problem with the original creation: that it is void. The ‘heavens and the earth’ that are structured on the first three days are populated with their ‘host’ in the second three days (2:1).
It is on this sixth day that mankind is created and given dominion over the fish of the sea, birds of the air, and the creatures of the earth. Mankind – male and female – is blessed and instructed to be fruitful, to multiply, to fill the earth, to subdue it, and to exercise dominion over its living creatures. There is a sort of progression implied here, as fertility and procreation gives rise to growth in population, which leads in turn to the spreading out of the human population upon the earth, which results in a steady taming and subduing of the natural wilderness, which, finally, establishes mankind’s rule over all of the creatures of God’s creation.

This progressive vocation has two key unifying themes: dominion (subdue and exercise dominion) and filling (be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth). We should notice that these two themes correspond to the two stages of God’s own creation work. Dominion relates to the first three days, where God divides, establishes, tames, and names the fundamental structures of creation. Filling relates to the second three days, where God generates new beings, fills, populates, glorifies, and establishes communion within his creation. Here we find an initial indication that humanity’s vocation within the world is to reflect, continue, and to extend God’s own creative rule of Genesis 1.

The Creation of Mankind

Mankind’s creation is described in Gen 1:27 in a threefold parallelism:

A. 1) God created  2) man  3) in his image

B. 3) in the image of God  1) he created  2) him

C. 3) male and female  1) he created  2) them

There are a few things to observe about this parallelism, in which the second two statements unpack the first.

First, man has both singularity and plurality: man is first spoken of as a singular entity (‘him’), then later as the plurality of male and female (‘them’). Humanity has a number of aspects to it: humanity is a kind, a race, and a multitude. As a kind, humanity is a unique species that finds its source and pattern in the original human being created in the image of God. Humanity is a race on account of its possession of generative potential as male and female and its spread and relationship to its origins through such unions. Humanity is a multitude as it realises this potential and fills the earth.
Second, sexual difference is the one difference within humanity that is prominent in the creation narrative. This significance is not merely that it gestures towards the generic plurality of humanity. Rather, it is male and femaleness which renders us a race and establishes the primary bonds of our natural relations and source of our given identities. We have been empowered as male and female to bring forth new images of God and of ourselves (cf. Genesis 5:3) and are ordered towards each other in a much deeper way than just as individual members of a ‘host’.

Third, there is widespread agreement among biblical scholars that the concept of the image of God in Genesis refers to a royal office or vocation that humanity enjoys within the world, as the administrator and symbol of God’s rule. The image of God is primarily focused upon the dominion dimension of mankind’s vocation. However, the filling dimension of mankind’s vocation – to which the maleness and femaleness of humanity chiefly corresponds – is not unconnected to this, as in the third part of the parallelism ‘male and female’ is paralleled with the ‘image of God’ in the first two parts.

Thus, by the end of Genesis 1, there are already a number of key terms, patterns, and distinctions in play. In subsequent chapters, these are given clearer shape as they are unpacked and developed.

**Genesis 1 & 2**

Genesis 2 contains a repeat in miniature of the great creation narrative of chapter 1. Verse 4 begins a new section of the Genesis account, what many have termed a second creation account. While this account is often presented as if it were an alternative creation account to that of Genesis 1, there are close relations between the two. Perhaps the most striking is the manner in which Genesis 2 roughly follows the pattern of Genesis 1.
In addition to repeating in miniature the creation pattern of Genesis 1, Genesis 2 also presents the establishment of the adam and the woman in the garden as a continuation of the narrative begun in the previous chapter. God rested on the seventh day, but, in contrast to the previous creation days, there is no reference to the end of the seventh day. Rather, the creation narrative of Genesis 2 is about the delegation of the creation to the charge of mankind: God’s resting is bound up with the commissioning of humanity.

### Genesis 1

**Day 0:** Heaven and earth created. Earth formless and void and covered by a vast watery deep (1:2).

**Day 1:** Light created (1:3-5).

**Day 2:** Firmament created dividing the waters above from the waters beneath. Firmament named Heaven (1:6-8).

**Day 3:** Waters gathered together in Seas, revealing the dry land, Earth. Earth brings forth vegetation (1:9-13).

**Day 4:** Lights placed in the firmament as signs to rule the day and night, to divide the light from the darkness, and to give light to the earth (1:14-19).

**Days 5-6:** Sea creatures, birds of the air, creatures of the land are brought forth by earth and sea, after which in an act of special and more direct creation, mankind is formed (1:20-28).

**Day 7:** God rests from his labours (2:1-3).

### Genesis 2

Heaven and earth created. Earth without plants and herbs of the field, or a man to till the ground. The earth originally irrigated by ground waters that come up from it and cover its entire face (2:4-6).

**The adam created (2:7).**

**Garden created and divided from the rest of the world, a sanctuary model of heaven (2:8).**

**The ground waters are gathered together in rivers, which mark out distinct lands and enable them to be named. The garden filled with trees and vegetation (2:9-14).**

**The adam placed in the firmament garden to serve and guard it, a sign of God’s rule, dividing it from the rest of the world. He is given the law concerning the tree (2:15-17).**

**God forms beasts and birds from the ground, representing the creatures of days 5 and 6 and brings them to the adam, who names them but does not find a suitable mate. Finally, in a distinct act of creation, God creates the woman out of the man’s side and brings her to him (2:18-23).**

**Man and woman naked and unashamed together in the garden (2:24-25).**

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I have chosen to employ the terminology of ‘the adam’, rather than ‘Adam’. Within Genesis 1-3, adam doesn’t yet seem to function as a proper name, as it later does in places such as 4:25. Nor does adam mean ‘man’ (as ish does in 3:23), identifying the man over against the woman (ishshah). Rather, the term defines the man – the earthling – relative to the earth (adamah) from which he was formed. It is also the term used for the entire humankind. As the specific connotations and connections of such a term are an important dimension of its meaning, it can be helpful to alert ourselves to these when interpreting or translating a term such as adam.

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the music and the meaning of male & female
The creation that God delegates rule over to mankind is an incomplete creation. Outside of the Garden, the earth still needs to be subdued, filled, and named. God prepares the adam for this task by giving him a worked model and a period of apprenticeship in the Garden of Eden, a kindergarten for humanity in its infancy. In chapter 2, God charges the adam with working on a part of the creation that he had left unfinished, and oversees him in that task. Although God had named all of the regions established on the first three days, all of the creatures with which God had populated them remained unnamed. God brings these creatures to the adam in order that he might complete this part of the work of creation.

Although we may be inclined to think of the creation as if a static container packed with assorted contents, the creation narrative has a profoundly temporal structure. Evening and morning, day and night, seasons and years, a week of creation work divided into two distinct yet parallel halves, the repetition with variation of that pattern in the following chapter. The first two chapters of Genesis also present us with a creation that strains forward to realise its calling and purpose. Humanity must be fruitful and multiply. The earth must be tamed, named, and filled, and mankind must exercise dominion over its creatures. The gold and precious stones of Havilah (Gen 2:11-12) must be mined and the riches of other lands brought in to glorify the Garden, as mankind moves outward into the world. Man must mature in rule, subduing the wider creation. Rather than comparing it to a container being packed with contents, it might be more apt to understand the creation depicted in Genesis 1-2 as if the opening of a grand symphony, anticipating and propelling the listener into the richly orchestrated movement which follows.

This must be borne in mind when we read the Scriptures more generally, within which it becomes clear that the creation account is very much part of a broader narrative. Themes introduced in these chapters are developed, unfolded, and perfected. This is perhaps nowhere clearer than in Revelation, where in the new creation many of the themes of the first creation are revisited. Christ and his bride are joined together in a glorified Garden-City, into which the riches of the whole world have been brought, and from which a river of living water flows. Each of the divisions of the first three days is transformed: there is no longer night, for the everlasting Day has dawned (Revelation 21:23-25); there is no longer a firmament veil dividing heaven from earth (21:2-3); there is no more sea (21:1).

The temporal impulse of the creation narrative must also be kept at the forefront of our minds when reflecting upon the relation between male and female, who are created by God as characters in and agents of this larger narrative. The creation of man and woman is one of the ways in which God establishes, fulfils, and manifests his purpose in the mighty symphony of his creation. Man and woman, in their particular labour and relations, have a sort of ‘musical’ role to perform. They repeat in their own ways the foundational musical themes provided by God’s own labour and provide figures of ‘musical’ realities that are gloriously expressed in Christ and the Church. The bringing together of man and woman in marriage and their
Differentiation in Humanity’s Creation and Vocation

Whereas Genesis 1 focuses upon the creation, commissioning, and blessing of mankind in general and in an undifferentiated fashion, in Genesis 2 a more specific and differentiated view of male and female comes into view. It is important that we read Genesis 1 and 2 in close correspondence with each other for this reason.

That there should be gendered differentiation in the fulfilment of the divine commission is hardly surprising when we consider the tasks that lie at the heart of mankind’s vocation. Although both sexes participate in both tasks, exercising dominion and being fruitful are not tasks that play to male and female capabilities in an equal manner, but rather are tasks where sexual differentiation is usually particularly pronounced. In the task of exercising dominion and subduing creation, the man is advantaged by reason of the male sex’s typically significantly greater physical strength, resilience, and willingness to expose itself to risk. He is also advantaged on account of the greater social strength of bands of men. In the task of being fruitful, multiplying, and filling the creation, however, the most important capabilities belong to women. It is women who bear children, who play the primary role in nurturing them, and who play the chief role in establishing the communion that lies at the heart of human society. These are differences seen across human cultures.

As G.K. Beale has argued, the Garden of Eden is a divine sanctuary and there are many clues within Genesis 2 to this fact. In verse 15, the adam is placed in the Garden to cultivate and guard it, the same words that are repeatedly used to refer to the Israelites who are set apart to serve God and keep his word, or the priests who keep the service or charge of the tabernacle. God walks about in the midst of the Garden. The Garden is the site of holy food, some of which is forbidden. The adam is also given a law concerning the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which he must uphold.

One might surmise a gendered differentiation in relation to the human vocation in chapter 1. In the context of God’s establishing the order of the sanctuary in chapter 2, and the outcome of the overturning of that order in chapter 3, such a gendered differentiation becomes more explicit, not least in the fact that the priestly task chiefly falls to the adam, rather than his wife.

There are a series of sharp and important contrasts between the *adam* and his companion, the woman, in Genesis 2:

First, and perhaps most obvious, the man is created before the woman (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:7-9 and 1 Timothy 2:13).

Second, the man alone can stand for humanity as a whole. In Genesis 2, the creation of mankind is not the creation of an undifferentiated population of people, but the creation of an *adam* from the *adamah*, followed by the later creation of a woman from the *adam*’s side. It is in this particular being that the human race finds its unity. This is a point borne out in the rest of Scripture: Adam is the representative head of the old humanity. This humanity is Adamic humanity, not Adamic-Evean humanity. Mankind is particularly summed up in the man.

Third, the image of God is especially focused upon the *adam*. He is the figure who peculiarly represents and symbolises God’s dominion in the world. The *adam* is placed within the Garden as the light within its firmament (the lights on day four are established as rulers), charged with upholding the divisions that God had established, performing the royal function associated with the divine imaging. Like God, in his great dominion and subduing acts of the first three days of creation, the man names and orders the creatures.

Fourth, the *adam* is created to be a tiller and guardian of the earth, while the woman is created to be the helper of the *adam*, to address the multifaceted problem of his aloneness. The sort of help that the woman is expected to provide to the *adam* has been a matter of considerable debate. However, it isn’t hard to discover the core of the answer. If it were for the naming of the animals, the task is already completed. If it were purely for the labour of tilling of the earth, a male helper would almost certainly be preferable. While men can undoubtedly find the companionship of women very pleasant and vice versa, beyond the first flush of young love it is in the companionship of members of their own sex that many men and women choose to spend the majority of their time. The primary help that the woman was to provide was to assist the *adam* in the task of filling the earth through child-bearing, a fact that is underlined in the later judgment upon the woman. The problem of man’s aloneness is not a psychological problem of loneliness, but the fact that, without assistance, humanity’s purpose cannot be achieved by the *adam* alone.

Fifth, the *adam* was created from the dust, with God breathing into him the breath of life. The woman was created with flesh and bone from the *adam*’s side while he was in a deep sleep. The woman’s being derives from the man’s, the man’s being from the earth – the *adamah*. Adam was ‘formed’ while the woman is ‘built’.
Sixth, the *adam* was created outside of the Garden and prior to its creation; the woman was created within it. The woman has an especial relationship to the inner world of the Garden; the *adam* has an especial relationship with the earth outside of the Garden. Also, unlike the woman, the *adam* probably witnessed God’s Garden-forming activity as part of his preparation for his cultivation of the earth.

Seventh, the *adam* is given the priestly task of guarding and keeping the Garden directly by God, the woman is not. He is also given the law concerning the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, while the woman is not. It is the *adam* who will be held peculiarly responsible for the fall in the Garden. Notice also that on both of the occasions when God subsequently speaks of the law concerning the tree (3:11, 17), he addresses the *adam* in particular, speaking of it as a law both delivered to him alone and as a law concerning him most particularly and the woman only by extension. The difference between the *adam* and the woman here helps to explain how the woman could be deceived, while the man was not (the serpent plays off the information the woman had received first-hand in 1:29 against the information she had received second-hand from the *adam*).

Eighth, the *adam* is given the task of naming, as a sign and preparation for his rule over the world, while the woman is not. The *adam* also names the woman twice (first according to her nature as ‘woman’ in 2:23, then by her personal name ‘Eve’ in 3:20), while she does not name him.

Finally, in Genesis 2:24, the establishment of a marriage is described in an asymmetrical fashion, with the directionality of a man leaving his father and mother and joining his wife. I don’t believe this is accidental. The bonds of human relationship and communion are chiefly formed by and in women.

Later, in the Fall of humanity, there is a breakdown of the order established by God. The *adam* fails in his task of serving and keeping the Garden and of upholding the law concerning the tree. He allows the woman to be deceived, when it was his duty to teach and protect her. The Fall was chiefly the fall of the *adam*. The woman in turn fails in her calling as helper. In the paralleled judgments that follow, both the man and the woman are told that they will experience difficult labour in the fundamental area of their activity – the man in his labour upon the ground, the woman in her labour in child-bearing – and both the man and woman will be frustrated and dominated by their source – the woman will be ruled over by the man and the man will return to the ground.

The created order is disrupted and disorder, death, and sin come into the world. However, a promise and hope of salvation is also given in the divine declaration concerning the seed of the woman and in the *adam*’s naming of the woman as the mother of all living. Sexual difference is variously disordered by the fall, but is also a means through which the disorder introduced by the fall will be overcome.
The difference between the sexes is a central and constitutive truth about humanity, related to our being created in the image of God. Humanity has two distinct kinds: a male kind and a female kind. Sexual dimorphism, the fact that we come in these two distinct kinds, is a fundamental fact about humanity.

Men and women are created for different primary purposes, purposes which, when pursued in unity and with mutual support, can reflect God’s own form of creative rule in the world. The man’s vocation, as described in Genesis 2, primarily corresponds to the tasks of the first three days of creation: to naming, taming, dividing, and ruling. The woman’s vocation, by contrast, principally involves filling, glorifying, generating, establishing communion, and bringing forth new life – all tasks associated with the second three days of creation. Hence the differences between us as men and women are not merely accidental or incidental, but are integral to our purpose and deeply meaningful, relating to God’s own fundamental patterns of operation. God created us to be male and female and thereby to reflect his own creative rule in his world.

The differences between men and women are related to differences between primary realms of activity and different lifeworlds. These differences are differences that will unfold and expand over time, varying from culture to culture and context to context. The root differences are expressed in unique and diverse forms from culture to culture and from individual to individual. These differences exceed any single culture and any single individual, although each individual and culture expresses and participates in them in some particular limited form.

Men and women are formed separately and differently and there is a correspondence between their nature and their purpose. The man is formed from the earth to till the ground, to serve and rule the earth. The woman is built from the man’s side to bring life and communion through union. The biblical account is primarily descriptive, rather than prescriptive: men and women are created and equipped for different purposes and so will naturally exhibit different strengths, preferences, and behaviours. It should come as no surprise that the more fundamental reality of sexual dimorphism is accompanied by a vast range of secondary sexual differences, differences that typically correlate with key requirements of our primary purposes.

The different focal points of men and women’s creational vocations in Genesis do not represent the full measure or scope of their callings – as if women only existed to bear children or men only to be farmers – but rather are the seeds from which broader callings can thematically develop. Each
man and woman must find ways to bring the gendered aptitudes, capacities, and selves that God created them with to bear upon the situations he has placed them within. Although the centres of gravity of the sexes’ callings differ, man and woman are to work together and assist each other, each employing their particular strengths to perform humanity’s common task. Neither can fulfil their vocation alone.

In Genesis 1 and 2, the differences between men and women are chiefly focused upon their wider callings within the world, rather than upon their direct relationships with each other. The woman has to submit to the man’s leadership, not so much because he is given direct authority over her, but because his vocation is the primary and foundational one, relating to the forming that necessarily precedes the filling in God’s own creation activity. She is primarily called to fill and to glorify the structures he establishes and the world he subdues. It is less a matter of the man having authority over the woman as one of the woman following his lead. As the man forms, names, tames, establishes the foundations, and guards the boundaries, she brings life, communion, glory, and completion. Neither sex accomplishes their task alone, but must rely upon, cooperate with, and assist the other.

The differences between the sexes are also embodied differences. Possession of a womb is not something that can be detached from what it means to be a woman in Genesis, nor possession of a penis from what it means to be a man. It is not insignificant that circumcision and the opening of wombs are such central themes in the book: the conception, bearing, and raising of children are integral to the fulfilment of God’s purpose. In bringing about this purpose, the man’s phallic pride in his virility must be curbed by a sign of God’s promise and his weakness (i.e. circumcision) and the woman’s insufficiency to bear offspring must be remedied by the power of God.

Socially developed differences of gender extend out from and symbolically highlight the primary differences of our created natures and purposes. Social construction of gender is real, but it operates with the natural reality of difference between the sexes, rather than creating difference ex nihilo (i.e. out of nothing). The exact shape of the gendered differences between men and women vary considerably from culture to culture, yet the presence of a gender distinction between men and women is universal. Each culture has its own symbolic language of gender difference. Already within our natural bodies we see features whose purpose is not narrowly functional, but which exist for the purpose of signalling traits associated with virility or femininity to one’s own or the other sex. Hair is a good example here (e.g. long hair on women, beards on men). Most cultures take these natural differences and amplify and symbolize them by means of such things as clothing. Scripture highlights the importance of such social differences in places such as 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul discusses hair, and in Deuteronomy 22:5, where women who wear men’s gear and men who wear women’s robes are condemned.
The rich and expansive expression of sexual difference in a vast array of culturally conjugated gender differences can be a way in which we display the beauty of this particular difference. The difference between men and women is more than merely a random and unstable assortment of contrasts between two classes of persons: it is the ‘musical’ and meaningful difference of two sexes that are inseparably related to each other. Recognising this truth, most cultures celebrate sexual difference by developing many gendered customs, forms, norms, and traditions. Rather than treating gender, as our culture is often inclined to, as a restrictive and stifling legalistic constraint, such an approach welcomes sexual difference as an often liberating manifestation of meaning and beauty that resonates with the deep reality of the creation.

In speaking of the direct relationship between man and woman, it is not difference so much as the depth and love of one flesh unity that is emphasised. Men and women are different, yet those differences are not differences designed to polarise us or pit us against each other. Rather, these differences are to be expressed in unified yet differentiated activity within the world and the closest of bonds with each other. It is not about difference from each other so much as difference for each other. What makes the woman unique is her capacity for complementing labour in profound union with the man. The animals are also helpers, but only the woman is a suitable counterpart for the adam in his vocation and spouse with whom he can become one flesh. The differences between men and women are precisely features that make them fitting for each other.

Healthy sexual and gender difference have been marred by the fall in various and extensive ways, through sin, bodily dysfunction, and psychological disorder. The natural processes of sexual differentiation can go awry, as Jesus discusses in the case of those ‘born eunuchs’ in Matthew 19:11-12. Things such as the loving one-flesh union that ought to exist between husband and wife can be shattered by divorce, or perverted by oppressive male dominance.

**Concluding Reflections on Current Issues in Sexual Ethics**

Within Genesis 1 and 2, we discover a foundation for reflection upon gender and sexuality more broadly, with surprising relevance to many pressing questions of sexual ethics within a contemporary context. In these concluding remarks, I want to highlight ways in which the teaching of these chapters can be brought to bear upon two key questions in contemporary sexual ethics: same-sex marriage and transgender identity.
Genesis 2 in particular describes the creation of man and woman in a manner that makes clear that maleness and femaleness are not merely two illustrative instances of human diversity as such, but that together they represent a very specific and significant difference, a difference that has a peculiar importance, a difference expressly established by God at the beginning. Despite all of the variation between and within human societies, the concepts of maleness and femaleness are not ultimately formless and void of content, but relate to a reality that cuts across individuals and cultures. Genesis 2 scandalises prevailing prejudices by giving an account of the sexes that gives shape and content to their differences. It further scandalises by presenting the sexes as peculiarly and inextricably intertwined in their creation and vocation, finding their meaning and purpose in relation to each other.

Defences of same-sex relations and marriage, for instance, generally require a retreat from the scandalous specificity of the male-female relation and difference as described in Genesis 1 and 2. Yet, throughout, the specificity of the male-female relation and difference is foregrounded in these chapters. What the woman brings to the man is not companionship as such, nor mere genital relation, nor some gender neutral union. Prominent throughout Genesis 1 and 2 are the things that are peculiar to relations between men and women, things which are absent in same-sex relations. The blessing and vocation of fruitfulness is the most immediately noticeable. No same-sex union partakes of the fundamental creational blessing and calling enjoyed by the union of man and woman in marriage.

The capacity of natural marriage to traverse the most fundamental anthropological distinction – man and woman – and represent the bringing together of the two halves of humankind is another. Man and woman each peculiarly correspond to a particular aspect of God’s own creative activity: men to forming and women to filling. In the union of man and woman in their distinctiveness in the fulfilment of their shared human calling we can hear some intimation of the beauty of God’s own creative work in its particular form of unity and diversity.

That men and women can become ‘one flesh’ in marriage is a result of the fact that they are uniquely fitted for each other. The formation of the woman from the adam’s own flesh represents a special natural bond between the sexes that is fundamentally constitutive of each’s identity: the most intimate unity of the adam’s own body is severed and a new person is formed out of part of himself, with whom he can enter into a new, more glorious form of unity. This form of union is only truly possible between man and woman.
The union of man and woman in marriage has an ‘iconic’ capacity that no other unions possess in like manner: it is not merely one of a class of intimate unions, but a unique kind of its own. This union is peculiarly connected to the image of God, reflects God’s own creative labour, represents the traversal of the fundamental human difference, and the union of the two halves of humanity in the fulfilment of the fundamental human task and enjoyment of the blessing.

Each one of these facts stands against any gender neutral account of marriage. The physical dimension of marital union is not merely genital relations and excitement of erogenous zones as such, but the (re)union of two related sexes in a single ‘one flesh’ whole. This is a union most especially witnessed in the natural fittingness of the male–female union for the bearing of children: each sex has one half of a single sexual and reproductive system and the natural offspring of a male–female union is a positive manifestation of the ‘one flesh’ that bond can constitute.

Transgender Identity

Sexual difference in Genesis and the rest of Scripture is closely tied to the body and to the labour of procreation. Sexual reassignment surgery may create the appearance of the other sex’s physicality, but lacks any connection to the procreative telos (goal) or capacity of the sexed body. It cannot be more than a hollow simulation of the reality. For this reason alone, changing one’s sex can only ever be a fiction. As Oliver O’Donovan argues (in Begotten or Made), holding to this fiction risks artificialising the reality of sex more generally, presenting one’s sex as a matter of one’s will, rather than a fact of nature to be welcomed, a form of creation ordered to a particular telos, rather than a matter of willed self-expression.

More generally, the body has great prominence in Christian thought. The story of the creation of man and woman is the story of the construction of bodies. The story of the gospel is largely a story of things that happened to Christ’s body: conceived by the Spirit, born of the virgin, baptised by John, transfigured on the Mount, symbolically distributed at the Last Supper, crucified under Pilate, died, buried in the tomb, raised by the Spirit on the third day, caught up into heaven at the Ascension. The materiality, the objectivity, and the givenness of the body precedes and grounds our self-consciousness, activity, and self-determination. The body isn’t just something that clothes the self, but is itself the self. Our bodies have been claimed by God, visibly marked out for resurrection in the rite of baptism. Our bodies must be presented to God at their root, as the limbs and organs that provide the basis for the entire superstructure of the self. We don’t just have bodies that enable us to act: we are embodied selves and our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit. There is a unity between internal and external in the body, our interiority being inseparably connected with our exteriority, a fact often most powerfully experienced in sexual relations.
Recognising the body’s existence as integral to the self should help us to recognise just how traumatic a disruption of the integrity between one’s exteriority and interiority – one’s alienation from one’s own bodily self – could be. It is not surprising that many feel the need to address this with invasive procedures and to escape the force and reality of the disruption in social and medical pretence.

Even in their experience of a disordered sense of self, transgender persons can bear witness to the reality of sexual difference in surprising ways. Their intense alienation from their sexed bodies raises the question of why most people do not experience this and highlights the significance of the resonance between our subjectivity and the bodily objectivity of our selves, as a reality worthy of note. Their experience also pushes back against social constructivist understandings of sexed identities. If gender and sexual difference really are merely social constructs, artificial realities conjured up by society, how is it that it fails so radically in such cases? Transgender experience highlights the fact that the very self is generally experienced as gendered and that there are realms and forms of self-consciousness that we typically share with others of our sex, and which differentiate us from the other. There are also increasing scientific hints that many cases of transgender identity correlate with natural hormonal processes that have gone awry at some point in the person’s development, leading to an incongruence between the person’s sense of themselves as a sexed self and the sex of their body. The bodily basis of gendered subjectivities is also seen in accounts of transition, as transgender persons experience the effect of the other sex’s hormones.

The body is the objectivity of the self and is the chief means by which the self is connected to and defined by others. Our bodies were not created chiefly for self-expression, but for relationship. Adam’s body binds him to the earth; Eve’s body binds her to Adam. The body expresses givenness – the fact that we receive ourselves from sources outside of ourselves such as our parents and ancestors, the earth, and God and that we are caught up in larger unchosen realities that precede us and produce us, such as our sex. Our bodies also express our aptitude for self-donation – our capacity to give ourselves to others. It connects us to realities that are greater than ourselves, yet which are mysteriously at work in us. Changing the sex of one’s body threatens this openness of the body to the other. One’s sexed body is integral to one’s capacity for modes of relation: one’s identity as father or mother, son or daughter, brother or sister and one’s natural resonance and affinity with other members of one’s sex.

By its very nature, the sexed identity that a transsexual person transitions to will always struggle to exceed a mere persona, an assumed identity that masks the reality. The transition required will also generally involve an assault upon the actual bodily self, rendering it incapable of bearing offspring, for instance, and unsuited for marriage. Given the prominent relationship between the creation of the sexes and the calling and blessing of procreation in Genesis, this is a serious thing indeed.
Scripture clearly and unequivocally punctures the fictions at the heart of much contemporary transgender ideology. However, we must distinguish clearly between transgender ideology and transgender persons. There are transgender persons who recognise the integrity and importance of sexual difference, deny the possibility of actually becoming a member of the other sex, yet argue for the tragic necessity of extreme measures to manage what they understand as their disorders of gendered subjectivity. I believe that a far deeper sensitivity and caution than many conservative Christians have typically shown in relation to transgender persons is required in such cases.

Scripture firmly closes the doors to the option of transition and defines sex and the gendered self in a manner that makes transition from one sex to another impossible. However, Scripture’s recognition of exceptions to the regular norms of sexual difference (those ‘born eunuchs’ in Matthew 19, who are most likely intersex persons) and its provision of means of relief in cases of irresolvable brokenness such as divorce – means of relief that are tragic testimonies to the work of sin and death – does, I believe, leave us with difficult questions of what to do in certain exceptional or extreme cases. For instance, what do we do with XY intersex persons with complete androgen insensitivity syndrome (CAIS), who are chromosomally and gonadally male, yet apparently female in external genitalia and gender identity? What do we do in the case of the person whose gender dysphoria has led them to attempt suicide and for whom some form of identification with the other sex is the only realistic option that they or the professionals helping them can envisage for addressing their problems?

When dealing with such exceptions or extreme cases, considerable prudence and patience may be required, as the norms may not readily or straightforwardly apply (although they are invariably relevant for the process of our deliberation) and certain accommodations may need to be made for a brokenness that cannot be overcome. In dealing with transgender persons, we may face similar questions to those we experience when dealing with the messy relationships that exist in a society where the institution of marriage is unravelling. Is an appropriate emphasis and insistence upon biblical ideals something that leaves us unable to deal well with people in intractably compromised or complicated realities?

I don’t believe that it is. In fact, a clear understanding of the biblical norms is a prerequisite for understanding and speaking to such realities. Wisely and compassionately recognising and handling such complicated, exceptional, or extreme cases, while maintaining the clarity and authority of the scriptural norms, and resisting unbiblical compromise, is the challenge we face.

Here it is important that we always keep in mind both Genesis 1-2 and Genesis 3: there is a good natural order to the world created by God and a disruption of that order by sin and death. We must never allow recognition of the disruption of the natural order to represent a denial of its continuing force and goodness and of our duty to uphold and pursue it. In upholding
the goodness of the natural order, however, we must acknowledge that this order has been unsettled, occasionally in ways that cannot be rectified or overcome in this life. For instance, there are tragic cases where the natural distinction between male and female is unclear.

In dealing with matters such as transgender identity or same-sex marriage, it is important to bring into focus the temporal context in which the scriptural teaching regarding the body, the sexes, and marriage is developed. Marriage and the body are not unchanging realities. Rather, marriage is a calling peculiarly pertaining to this present age, in which the world must be subdued and filled. Once the new creation is ushered in, whatever place marriage still has, it will definitely be a radically transformed one, and will be characterised more by fulfilment than by ongoing vocation. It will also be eclipsed by the greater realities of Christ and his bride to which it points and in which, in some measure, we already participate.

Likewise, although our bodies are currently afflicted by sin, alienation, and death, and manifest the unravelling of the natural order, they await a great ‘transition’. Transgender persons, who can experience the post-Fall alienation of the body in an especially acute form, are not to be faulted in longing for a transition, although the particular ‘transitions’ that they obtain will not effect the redemption of the body that we all need. Part of the witness of the Church in such situations must be a recovery of the centrality of the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, the limbs and organs of Christ, the object of divine redemption, and site of salvation. In baptism, as I have already noted, there is a powerful witness to the temporality of our bodies: our Fall-scarred bodies are marked out by the reality of Christ’s death and visibly set apart for future resurrection. There are wrongs that cannot be righted now, brokenness that cannot be repaired, wounds that cannot be healed. Yet in such declarations of divine promise, powerfully directed to our very bodies themselves, and in the Church’s communion of the Spirit that they manifest and produce, we can find hope and strength to endure. There is coming a time when all tears will be wiped away, every injustice rectified, everything lost restored, and the weakness and mortality of our earthly bodies overwhelmed in a life that will well up eternal.
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