No Longer Male and Female:
Ancient Christian Voices Illuminating Gender Beyond the Binary

by

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Date: July 17, 2023

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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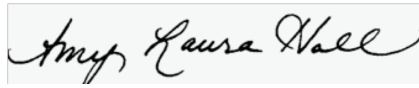

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Abstract

As faith communities engage in conversations about the meaning and significance of gender, many people have begun exploring the concept of gender beyond a fixed binary of male and female. These conversations can be challenging, raising complicated questions and employing unfamiliar concepts. This thesis seeks to engage the conversation about gender by attending to voices found in the biblical tradition, discovering a resource for better understanding the contemporary questions that have been posed. Although some may argue that the Bible endorses a strict, male-female binary, a close examination reveals that the Bible paints a much more complex picture of gender and its significance. This thesis will explore gender from several angles, discovering biblical and theological resources for a more expansive conception of gender beyond the binary. Written from a perspective that supports the full inclusion and embrace of transgender and nonbinary people in Christian churches, this thesis seeks to highlight ways that the Bible can be a useful tool for understanding gender in a way that is more nuanced and ultimately more faithful to the beautiful complexity of God's creation.

Dedication

For my children, for all gender-expansive children, and for those who love them.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the generous guidance and feedback from my readers, Dr. Amy Laura Hall and Dr. Roberto Che Espinoza. Thank you both for all of your contributions.

I am also grateful to the faculty at Duke Divinity School for their insight and support during the D.Min. program. In particular, Dr. Warren Smith provided invaluable feedback on my third chapter, which is adapted from a paper on Gregory of Nyssa that I wrote for his church history course. Dr. Ken Evers-Hood and Dr. Sarah Musser were helpful conversation partners in the development of this thesis. Thank you for your guidance.

Thank you to the members University Baptist Church for supporting me in my studies at Duke Divinity School, and for all that you mean to my family and to me.

Finally, I am forever grateful to my wife, Erin, and my three wonderful children. Thank you for inspiring my work, for sustaining me during this doctoral program, and for filling my days with joy, love, and hope.

Introduction

"I'm not king of the hill, I'm queen of the hill!" Since our child was two, they consistently pushed back whenever my wife or I referred to them as a boy, even indirectly. For a few years, this was just a quiet conversation in our home, but midway through kindergarten, this changed. Our kid asked to start wearing dresses to school and began to use different pronouns. As parents, we tried to be as supportive as possible, and we were extremely grateful to have teachers who were understanding and compassionate. But this was new territory for us. I had a lot to learn. Actually, I still have a lot to learn.

I approach the topic of gender identity, therefore, not as a seasoned scholar of gender studies or as a transgender or nonbinary person myself. Rather, I come to this conversation as a parent and minister, someone who cares deeply about this subject and wants to help others gain a deeper understanding of these questions. In my ministerial work, it has become clear to me that the parenting questions I have faced are similar to the questions that many people are asking, including in churches. Partly because of the presence of gender expansive young people in our midst, my congregation has begun talking more about gender and trying to make sense of this shifting landscape. We are not the only ones.

Whether in the political debates on the evening news or the conversations taking place in church parking lots, contemporary American society is engaged in a passionate discussion around the meaning of gender. Such questions carry profound theological and practical implications for Christian churches. In the past few years, I have seen how quickly this conversation is progressing, as more and more people are rethinking previously held ideas about the nature and significance of gender. Whereas previously the consideration of transgender individuals was an abstract question with seemingly vague implications for local faith communities, many churches are discovering that gender-expansive people are found in their pews and in the families of their members, bringing this conversation to the forefront.

My direct experience has been in moderate to progressive Baptist congregations that are predominately white, yet statistics show that this trend is evident across demographic lines. This is particularly true of younger generations. A study from the Pew Research Center in 2022 found that 1.6% of adults are transgender or nonbinary. The numbers for young adults, ages 18-29, are higher, with 2% describing themselves as trans and 3% describing themselves as nonbinary, for a total of 5.1%. The same study also found that a growing percentage of people, 44%, say that they personally know someone who is

transgender.[1] While other studies report slightly different numbers, the trend of increasing visibility of trans and nonbinary people is consistent. Naturally, then, this same increase is reflected in the lives and families of church members, raising the vital question of how the church will respond.

Knowing that gender has become a hot button issue in wider political discourse, pastors might approach the subject with understandable trepidation. Likewise, members of congregations may be hesitant to raise the questions with which they have been wrestling for fear of the responses they will receive. Acknowledging an evolving perspective on gender risks pushback from those who consider such views to be a modern, liberal, heretical invention. Simultaneously, people who are still learning the new terminology around gender identity and expression may fear raising their questions aloud, for fear that a poor phrasing or clumsy word choice might bring accusations of being ignorant or transphobic. These are treacherous waters. It is no surprise, then, that many congregations are tempted to avoid entering these difficult conversations. And yet, these questions are inescapable for churches seeking to engage the lived

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[1] Pew Research Center, "About 5% of Young Adults in the U.S. Say Their Gender Is Different from Their Sex Assigned at Birth," (June 7, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/06/07/about-5-of-young-adults-in-the-u-s-say-their-gender-is-different-from-their-sex-assigned-at-birth/.

reality of their members in a contemporary American context. Finding a faithful response is vital to the church.

From a practical standpoint, the challenges presented to congregations are many. At the outset, there is an educational gap that must be closed, as people approach this issue with widely varying levels of experience. This difference is particularly stark across generational lines, especially in contexts where younger people have been raised with greater exposure to different expressions of gender. Beyond merely the educational aspect, however, complicated questions demand an answer. Encountering unfamiliar concepts, how are churches to discern when to learn with an open mind and when to push back? For those seeking to be inclusive of people who are transgender or nonbinary, what tangible steps will be required? How can churches navigate the uncertainty and change that is inherent to this conversation, as broader societal conventions and terminology continue to shift rapidly? Finally, how can congregations hold together during the complicated and potentially tense conversations that can surround this topic, holding space for the differences of perspective that may follow?

In my experience of ministry, I have seen people respond to this shifting landscape in a variety of ways, even within a single congregation. From one perspective, some people have read extensively about gender issues and seek to

be fully supportive of gender minorities, advocating for full inclusion both in the church and in society, including in governmental policies and legislation. From another perspective, some contest the changes they see taking place around them, expecting their church to reinforce traditionally binary positions and seeking legislation that restricts policies around gender, particularly when it comes to children. Despite the intensity of political rhetoric that presses toward extreme, oppositional positions, however, many of the people I have encountered in ministry hold positions that are not so easily pigeonholed. It is for these people in particular that I embark to write this thesis. Some have given little thought to the issue—at least until a family member comes out as transgender or a member of the youth group arrives at church on Sunday morning with new clothing and a new name. Some are trying to be supportive but find the concepts and terminology to be confusing and foreign. Others would like to be supportive but struggle to reconcile these new ideas with the traditional teachings they have heard in their faith communities. For many, even as their views on gender and sexuality expand and evolve, the application to matters of faith has not always been clear: can they believe these new things and still be part of the faith communities they hold dear?

In light of the confusion and uncertainty so often surrounding this issue, my hope is to draw out connections between our contemporary societal conversations around gender and the voices present within the Christian tradition that speak helpfully to the topic. Because this is such an immense subject that is approached from many angles, it is important to be clear about the intended audience of this work. While I do contend that contemporary understandings of gender are compatible with the Christian faith, the primary focus of the thesis is not an argument against more conservative perspectives that defend the gender binary. This is not a work of apologetics intended to convince skeptical or antagonistic people to open their church doors to the LGBTQ+ community, important though this work may be. Rather, I intend this thesis for curious, open-minded people who want to learn more about gender and the Christian faith. My own church context is a progressive congregation that takes an inclusive stance on issues of gender and sexuality, yet even affirming congregations like mine have much to learn. While I hope that this work's usefulness will not be limited to predominately white, moderate/progressive Baptist congregations like my own, I do not presume to speak for the whole church, nor to suggest that I know what steps all congregations should take. Rather, my hope is to create a useful resource for my own context, which may

then be applicable more widely. In this thesis, we will see that Christian Scripture and history provide essential resources for contemporary Christians seeking a nuanced, faithful understanding of gender. By engaging these voices from the past with curiosity and appreciation, we find insight for the present, even for the most vexing questions facing congregations today.

OVERVIEW

Each chapter of this thesis will explore elements of Christian Scripture and tradition that illuminate gender in particular ways, opening space beyond a fixed, male-female binary. The first chapter will provide an overview of the landscape, setting the stage for the rest of the work. A review of terminology will help to disentangle various aspects of gender and sexuality: biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. The ensuing discussion of several concepts, including the gender binary and nonbinary gender identity, will attempt to provide increased clarity around these complicated matters and will explain my usage of specific terms in the chapters to follow. I will then review features of gender theory and queer theology, exploring the broader conceptual landscape of this conversation, including some ongoing tensions and debates. My hope is to demonstrate not that this field is

incoherent or contradictory but rather that this is a lively conversation with vigorous debate and continual growth and development. Finally, I offer a few thoughts on biblical interpretation, describing the approach that I take in this thesis of bringing biblical voices into the contemporary conversation about gender.

The second chapter will consider the accounts of the world's creation found in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2-3, foundational texts for understanding humanity's relationship with God and with one another. I will show how the artistically open-ended language in Genesis 1:26-28, where humanity is created "male and female," makes room for mystery and evades neat explanations. I will then explain how being made "male and female" in the image of God raises interesting questions about the gender of God and the nature of human gender in God's image. Next, I will show how holding "male and female" alongside other binary pairs in the creation story broadens our understanding of the gender binary, raising new possibilities for interpretation. Finally, I will explain how Genesis 2-3 shows similarity and equality (rather than complementarian gender roles) and emphasizes that humans are made for community. In this way, the second chapter suggests that Genesis does not establish a strict binary for gender; instead, the creation accounts in Genesis make space for thoughtful

interpretation and shed light on how we might understand gender in more nuanced ways.

The third chapter turns to an influential figure in the early Church. While Gregory of Nyssa wrote extensively on a variety of theological subjects, his views on gender are particularly relevant to the project at hand. Gregory saw gender not as a fundamental characteristic of human nature but as a secondary concession to provide for reproduction in light of the fall. As is evident in his writings, he viewed gender as temporary, a characteristic that would not be present in the resurrection body. Gregory also wrote fascinating things about his saintly sister, Macrina, transcending her gender even in this life, becoming like the angelic beings beyond gender who are encountered in the resurrection. Because of the ways he minimized the significance and permanence of gender, the writings of Gregory are surprisingly relevant for modern questions about what gender means and whether it can change. This also brings an ancient voice into the conversation, demonstrating that such questions about gender are not just a modern concern that was introduced in the last few decades.

The fourth chapter will consider the example of eunuchs in the Bible. As people whose bodies did not fit the typical gender norms and whose place in society was questioned, eunuchs provide our best counterpart to nonbinary or

transgender people in Scripture. Of course, these identities are not exactly the same, but the similarities provide an interesting parallel. In this chapter I will explore the various ways eunuchs are portrayed in the Bible, noting in the existence of these various voices that there is no single way that eunuchs are presented. My hope is to show how these different portrayals are similar to the Church's potential stances toward gender minorities today. In the Deuteronomic law, eunuchs are excluded, likely because they do not fit neatly into rigid categories. The prophet Isaiah envisions a day when eunuchs would be fully accepted. The words of Jesus add nuance to the conversation and recognize the diversity of human experience. Finally, the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts presents an example of tangible inclusion and embrace. My hope is that locating these multiple voices in the Bible will help make space for the various perspectives in the multi-faceted conversations taking place in the church today, even as we continue to move toward the inclusion modeled in the example of Jesus and the church in Acts.

The fifth and final chapter of the thesis will consider Galatians 3:28, which includes the fascinating claim that in Christ "there is no male and female," a poetic description of the new creation that takes place in Jesus Christ. Reviewing the interpretation history of this passage, we find that this passage can be applied

to societal gender roles in various ways, raising important questions about now to navigate difference without obliterating distinctiveness. After careful exegesis of this critical verse, we expand our scope to consider how issues like circumcision and the law get spiritualized in Paul's writings, leading to an internal focus rather than a dependence on external characteristics—a shift with clear implications for how gender might be understood internally rather than externally. We will then consider practical implications for life in Christ: how do we embody a church in which there is "no longer male and female," reexamining congregational practices to avoid reimposing distinctions that have been overcome in Christ? Finally, we will close with a discussion about how churches can navigate their differences well when discussing these challenging questions.

My hope is that the chapters of this thesis will demonstrate that we need not abandon the past or disregard Scripture to embrace transgender and nonbinary people in the church. In fact, the Scriptural witness can help faith communities seeking to understand gender in ways beyond an oversimple binary. Because our contemporary debates are a continuation of long-running conversations within the faith, we can find insight by looking backward and situating our conversation within that larger framework. This is not easy work, nor will it always be harmonious. However, when approached with humility,

curiosity, and generosity, these conversations can be enriching for congregations, as people discover a perspective on gender that is congruent with the experience of gender in contemporary society while remaining faithfully rooted in the witness of Christian Scripture and tradition.

Chapter 1: An Overview of Gender

What is gender? As we seek to better understand gender in light of Christian Scripture and tradition, this deceptively simple question is vital. Yet when seeking to define gender, it quickly becomes clear that several distinct concepts are intertwined. Does gender refer to people's physical characteristics or their internal self-understanding? Does it involve their actions and the way they present themselves? How do attraction and relationships enter the picture? And in all of these areas, who gets to decide? These questions are complex, and they are profoundly important. Gender is a central way that human beings understand themselves and one another. It is no wonder, then, that in recent years so much passion in public discourse has been directed toward the concept of gender. As we seek to engage this conversation productively, a critical first step for us is to define the terminology that we use when speaking about gender.

It must be acknowledged at the outset that there is a challenge and even a danger in defining these terms too rigidly. The terminology used in this field continues to evolve rapidly, such that any definitions offered today must be held as provisional, subject to refinement and correction in the future. Defining terms requires a great deal of caution. For instance, in years past one might have heard

about a “sex change” operation, which also might have been described as “sex reassignment surgery.” Both terms are avoided now, however, replaced by terms such as “gender confirmation surgery.”[1] This is not simply a matter of shifting linguistic preferences, nor is it a matter of political correctness, as some critics might suggest. Rather, the shift in language reflects the reality that our understanding of gender is growing and improving over time, particularly as underlying assumptions are revealed and corrected. Terms like “sex change” and “gender reassignment” imply that what is taking place is fundamentally a change. “Gender confirmation surgery,” on the other hand, emphasizes the continuity that is at the heart of the process, as a person’s external characteristics are altered to correspond with their internal gender identity, which has been present all along. Even this statement, however, must be held with humility. Understandings may shift further, leading to new linguistic formulations. Moreover, different people have different preferences for language, such that what is preferred by one person may be considered problematic by another, and vice versa.

[1] An explanation of several shifts in terminology can be found at GLAAD, "Glossary of Terms: Transgender," GLAAD Media Reference Guide, 11th Edition, 2022, https://www.glaad.org/reference/trans-terms.

Defining terms, therefore, can be extremely challenging. And yet, clarity is crucial. People who lead congregations need to understand the terminology that their congregants use to describe themselves, and they need to understand how people who serve in medical and social work settings use the terms. Indeed, even though we quickly discover many layers of complication and nuance, one of the gifts of this terminology is its ability to bring more complexity and precision to terms as simple-seeming as "male" and "female." Traditional views of gender conflate several components of human gender that are interrelated but distinct. To better understand human nature, and to better understand the conversation unfolding in contemporary American society, it is vital to disentangle these elements. We begin, therefore, by distinguishing four aspects of gender and sexuality: biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. While these terms are defined well in many places,[2] it is important at the beginning of this thesis to be clear about how these terms are being used in the present work. It is my hope that this overview may also be helpful to those who are less familiar with this terminology.

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[2] Detailed explanations of these terms can be found in many places. The description that follows draws primarily on the GLAAD Media Reference Guide; Anne Branigin, "A Guide to the Words We Use in Our Gender Coverage," *The Washington Post*, April 1, 2022; and Elijah C. Nealy, *Transgender Children and Youth: Cultivating Pride and Joy with Families in Transition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017).

Four Aspects of Gender and Sexuality

Biological sex (or *sex at birth*) is a classification—as male, female, or intersex—based on a person's physical anatomy. When babies are born, they are assigned a sex based on the appearance of their external characteristics. The vast majority of babies have genitalia that are easily categorized as either "male" or "female," and this becomes their "sex assigned at birth." The word "assigned" is used because it reflects the fact that such a categorization is attributed to the child by others: the medical staff, most likely, as well as the child's parents and other observers. Based on the child's appearance, other people refer to the child as male or female. The term also suggests that because this description is not intrinsic to the child, it is not guaranteed to be a definitive, accurate description. It is an educated guess, a determination based on easily observable evidence. While most people have a biological sex of either male or female, it is not always so clear cut. A significant minority of people are "intersex," meaning that their external genitalia, internal reproductive organs, and/or chromosomes are not all classifiable as male or female. There are a variety of configurations that occur naturally and have done so throughout human history, some being evident at birth and some becoming apparent at puberty. This is not a new phenomenon.

Ancient Judaism identified several types of people we would describe as intersex, detailing in the Talmud their participation in communal life without stigma.[3] Modern estimates suggest that up to 1.7% of the population has intersex characteristics.[4] Biological sex, then, is usually described as male, female, or intersex.

Gender identity refers to an individual's sense of their own gender. Whereas biological sex considers a person's anatomy on the outside, gender identity is determined by a person's self-understanding on the inside. Everyone has a gender identity. Most people know themselves to be a man or a woman, and this usually corresponds to their biological sex. Such people are known as cisgender. However, many people have an internal sense of themselves as different from their external anatomy. People like this, whose biological sex and gender identity are different, generally describe themselves as transgender or trans. Some people are born in a body that is viewed as male at birth, but they know themselves to be women. Some people are born in a body that is viewed as female at birth, but they know themselves to be men. Others understand their gender as a combination of male and female or as neither male nor female, and

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[3] Vincent E. Gil, *A Christian's Guide through the Gender Revolution: Gender, Cisgender, Transgender, and Intersex* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021).
[4] GLAAD Media Reference Guide.

they may refer to themselves as nonbinary or genderqueer. Yet others experience their gender as changing over time, and they may describe themselves as genderfluid. There are many specific terms that are used to describe the various identities that people experience.

Gender expression is another component of gender that must be distinguished from the prior two. Gender expression refers to how people present themselves to others, particularly in ways that communicate something about their gender. This can include a wide variety of things, such as the person's clothing, hair style, mannerisms, voice, name, and pronouns. All of these things are observed, rightly or wrongly, by other people as indicators of a person's gender. Expectations about gender expression are heavily dependent on what a particular culture views as masculine and feminine, which changes over time. The changing norms may lead to misunderstanding, particularly in multi-generational settings, such as congregations, where an older person may be confused by a younger person's presentation and make errant inferences. For instance, a boy might wear his hear long and paint his nails, but this does not necessarily mean that he is trans or nonbinary, even though his gender expression would have seemed peculiar in an earlier generation. Some gender norms that were formerly rigid have loosened. Other expectations simply change

over time, such as the acceptance of women wearing pants instead of dresses or the evolution of the color pink from being seen as a masculine color a century ago to being seen as a feminine color in the United States today.[5]

Decisions about gender expression hold a special significance for transgender people, many of whom "seek to align their gender expression with their gender identity to resolve the incongruence between their knowledge of their own gender and how the world 'sees' them."[6] These steps may be part of a person's "transition," which can include social, legal, and medical elements.[7] Some people may choose to express their gender differently at different times and in different situations. It is also important to remember that gender expression does not necessarily reveal a person's gender identity. For instance, a man might wear a dress (a more feminine gender expression) and still know himself to be a man (male gender identity). Gender expression, then, must be understood as a distinct component of gender. For most people, there is an alignment of biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression, all of which fit into the traditional categories of either "male" or "female." For many others, however, this simply is not the case.

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[5] Nealy, 7-8.
[6] GLAAD Media Reference Guide.
[7] GLAAD Media Reference Guide.

Sexual orientation is a separate phenomenon than gender, but it is important to note it here because of how frequently these concepts are conflated when people discuss gender. While gender has to do with a person's own identity, sexual orientation refers to a person's attraction to others, including "physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction."[8] A person may be attracted to people of their own gender, to people of a different gender, or some combination. Sexual orientation is often considered more of a spectrum than a binary. Some of the many terms used to describe sexual orientation are lesbian, gay, straight, bisexual, pansexual, and asexual. Importantly, people of any gender can have any sexual orientation. For instance, one trans woman might be a lesbian (attracted to women), another might be straight (attracted to men), and another might be pansexual (attracted to people regardless of gender). Gender and sexual orientation are separate concepts; one does not determine the other. For the purposes of the present study, our focus will primarily be on gender rather than sexual orientation, but some of the same insights are applicable in both cases.

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[8] GLAAD Media Reference Guide.

BEYOND THE GENDER BINARY

An important issue in the present study is the concept of the *gender binary*, which refers to the idea that there are two distinct possibilities for gender: male and female. This perspective on gender assumes that every person is either a man or a woman. While this system has been the norm in many contexts, particularly in white, Western ones,[9] it is not the only way to view gender. Some people now understand gender as a spectrum, with some people located more toward the masculine end, some toward feminine end, and some falling in the middle. In such a view, people are not limited to only two options for gender; those in the middle might claim an identity such as nonbinary or genderqueer (among other options). The shift toward gender as a spectrum may explain the quickly increasing numbers of people in American society who identify as nonbinary, which has risen to a rate of 3% of young adults.[10] People who in the past would have been forced into one of two boxes now have the option to claim an identity in between those two poles, an "intentional way of living life between

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[9] Austen Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 23.
[10] A recent Pew Research Center study found that 3% of young adults identify as nonbinary. Pew Research Center, 2022.

or beyond the gender binary."[11] As a result, even though the distribution of human gender may be no more diverse now than in past years, the number of nonbinary people would increase as this becomes seen as a valid gender identity for people to claim. For some people, however, the spectrum itself remains too constricting, resting as it does on an axis demarcated by male and female. They prefer to break out of this system entirely and define gender in alternative ways.

When working with people who are nonbinary, one quickly runs into the limitations of the English language. This is particularly true with pronouns. Traditional use of he/him and she/her requires selecting one of two gender options for people, even those whose gender identity does not fit into those categories. Consequently, the use of the word "they" in its singular form has become commonplace as an option for referring to nonbinary people or for referring to anyone without specifying gender. Alternatively, some nonbinary people use neopronouns such as ze/hir or always use their name instead of pronouns.[12] Furthermore, it is problematic to assume a person's pronouns based on their appearance, for as we have seen above, gender expression and gender identity do not always align. As a result, it has become increasingly common for

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[11] Cody J. Sanders, *A Brief Guide to Ministry with LGBTQIA Youth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 19.

[12] See "How Do I Use Personal Pronouns?" accessed April 8, 2023, https://pronouns.org/how.

people to share their pronouns alongside their name when introducing themselves.

Some umbrella terms for people whose gender does not fit in the binary include "gender-expansive" or "gender-diverse." Sometimes "trans" or "trans*" is used in a broad sense to encompass various identities as well. Because there is a wide range of terminology that is used by different people, it is helpful to ask specific people which terms they prefer to use for themselves. This is a field that continues to grow and develop, and the terminology shifts over time, as people find new language to describe gender identities that fall outside the binary framework. In the chapters that follow in this thesis, we will explore ways that Christian Scripture and tradition shed light on gender in ways broader than a strict binary. Before doing so, however, it is helpful to situate this work within the broader intellectual landscape of gender theory and queer theology.

JUDITH BUTLER AND GENDER THEORY

An influential figure in the field of gender theory is Judith Butler (they/them). Their book *Gender Trouble* remains a critical work in the field, and its ideas continue to be debated in academic circles. While much of this argument is too technical to discuss in detail here, it is helpful to lift out the general concept

of gender as performative. Butler challenges the idea of gender as a stable, ontological reality that exists within a person: "what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body."[13] Rather than being an innate feature of a person's identity, gender is something that is performed. It is created through this repeated performance: "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body."[14] As such, gender is also inherently unstable and can be subverted through actions that destabilize its production.[15]

Mary McClintock Fulkerson explains that Butler is responding to a Western cultural system in which gender and sexuality are defined together and seen through the lens of what Adrienne Rich calls "compulsory heterosexuality."[16] This system understands sexuality and gender in terms of the sexual desire and relationship between a man and a woman, defining them through that relationship. Such a system is, by necessity, constrictive to those

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[13] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Tenth Anniversary ed. (London: Routledge, 1999), xv.
[14] Butler, xv.
[15] Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Gender—Being It of Doing It? The Church, Homosexuality, and the Politics of Identity," in *Que(E)Rying Religion: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking (New York: Continuum, 1997), 195.
[16] See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980), http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173834.

within it: "Any thinking about desire and human relations is locked into this grid; any subject which does not conform is disciplined."[17] Butler clearly finds this system problematic, and they offer an alternative in the form of parody. Fulkerson's explanation and examples are helpful:

> Drag, cross-dressing and butch/femme lesbians are exemplary of subversive parody because they set up contradictions between the presumed anatomy, the gender prescribed by social code and the gender being performed. The dissonances between the anatomical body, the culturally defined gender, and the bodily display signify decentering challenges to the 'real identity' of the performer.[18]

Notice that such performances of gender, a parody of societal gender norms, serve as subversive acts of resistance. Parody serves to destabilize rigid expectations about gender.

One window into viewing the performativity of gender can be found in the ways that norms of gender expression are taught and enforced from a very young age. As children are learning to identify gender, they begin to look for clues, such as "the length of a person's hair, the kinds of clothes another child wears, or whether an adult is wearing earrings or makeup."[19] Children also learn in their earliest years that certain behaviors are viewed as appropriate or

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[17] Fulkerson, 193.
[18] Fulkerson, 195.
[19] Nealy, 6.

inappropriate for them, depending on their gender: "Through both positive and negative reinforcement, children learn which behaviors are rewarded and which are frowned upon. They then internalize these gender roles and expectations and are motivated to act in accordance with what they have understood is appropriate for their gender."[20] For instance, boys may be criticized as "girly" for playing with dolls, liking the color pink, or crying in public, while girls may face scorn for acting in ways that are not considered "ladylike." Based on the feedback they receive, they learn to act—that is, to *perform* their gender—in ways that align with the expectations of their context.

Some scholars note that American society tends to provide more leeway for girls, at least at a young age, to act in more "masculine" ways and be considered a "tomboy."[21] For boys and men, however, there has traditionally been much less room for variance. Writing about contemporary perspectives on masculinity, David Allen describes the strict rules for behavior that determine whether someone is seen as a "real" man: "We 'do' rather than 'are' masculine: real men don't eat quiche or hold each other's hands. Much of the labor of youth

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[20] Stephanie Brill, and Rachel Pepper, *The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Parents and Professionals Supporting Transgender and Nonbinary Children*, Revised and Updated ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Cleis Press, 2022), 12.
[21] Nealy, 7.

is learning how to 'do' masculinity—and to suffer the misfortune of getting it wrong."[22] The emphasis here is on behavior. There is nothing inherently masculine about a person simply because of their gender; masculinity is created through the performance of actions that fit with social conceptions of masculinity. With clear echoes of Butler's theories on performativity, Allen argues that "*masculinity* is a *social construction*, not a physical characteristic based upon anatomy."[23] Masculinity—like all aspects of gender—must be performed.

QUEER THEOLOGY

The work of Judith Butler and other theorists continues to reverberate in the academy, as queer theory extends into various areas of inquiry. Particularly relevant to this thesis is the field of queer theology.[24] As this discipline has arisen in the past few decades, it has moved in several directions. Patrick Cheng helpfully traces four overlapping strands of queer theology: "apologetic theology," which defends the ability to be both LGBTQ and Christian; "liberation

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[22] David G. Allen, "Multiplying Masculinities: An Overview of Contemporary Theories of Masculinity," in *Sex, Gender, and Christianity*, ed. Priscilla Pope-Levison and John R. Levison (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 119.
[23] Allen, 118.
[24] For a detailed discussion of queer theory and its development, see Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011); Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003); and Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018).

theology," which argues that the Gospel points toward liberation from oppressive systems, including heteronormativity and the gender binary; "relational theology," which seeks to discover God within erotic relationships; and "queer theology," which questions binaries of gender and sexuality.[25] In this fourth sense, queer theology questions underlying assumptions about how society is structured in binary ways.

Part of the task of queer theology is highlighting the instability of categories that are often taken for granted as natural. Linn Marie Tonstad explains this task of *denaturalization*: "Denaturalization renders visible the culturally constructed nature of our basic organizing categories, thus limiting their power and efficacy."[26] By showing how certain binary categories, such as gay/straight or man/woman, are culturally created and enforced, queer theorists counter the idea that such binaries are natural and inevitable, thus lessening their power. Closely related to this concept is a resistance to *essentialism*, which is the notion that identities such as gender are in inherent part of who people are. Following Butler, many queer theorists contend that such identities are not part

[25] Cheng, 26.
[26] Tonstad, 56.

of a person’s fundamental essence but rather are socially constructed. Tonstad explains how this impulse is connected to the notion that change is possible:

> Things don’t *have* to be the way they are; they could be otherwise. The way they are isn’t determined by an immutable nature (denaturalization) nor by the real being of things (anti-essentialism). Instead, the way things are is the result of contingent processes, even though we often experience the way things are as natural and (to some extent) unchanging.[27]

Because gender is not a part of one’s essential nature, it is not permanently fixed and unquestionable. By challenging societal assumptions about gender in this way, queer theory makes space for alternative arrangements to take shape.

Queer theology engages in this work within the context of Christian theology, Biblical study, and practice. In so doing, queer theology “erases boundaries by challenging and deconstructing the ‘natural’ binary categories of sexual and gender identity.”[28] Such work can take many forms. Indeed, sometimes the work can appear contradictory, as not all queer theologians work from a single trajectory. To take one example, Carolyn Sharp describes a tension within feminism between some feminists advocating specifically for women and girls and those “who are influenced by postmodern gender studies and thus see gender and sexual identity as performed along a socially constructed

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[27] Tonstad, 70.
[28] Cheng, 10.

spectrum."[29] In other words, what does it mean to advocate on behalf of women when the very category of "woman" is rendered unstable by the notion that there is no fundamental essence of womanhood?

Linn Marie Tonstad identifies a similar point of tension between anti-essentialist analysis and those advocating for the inclusion of LGBTQ community. The challenge here is that "arguments for acceptance and inclusion are often predicated on a sometimes unstated, sometimes explicit assumption that queer, trans*, and nonbinary people are *born that way*."[30] Clearly, such a notion does not align well with an anti-essentialist viewpoint that calls into question the existence of such stable modes of identity. Likewise, David Allen, who follows Butler in emphasizing the ways that gender is performed and constructed according to societal norms, wonders how to make sense of the testimony of transgender people who say they have been keenly aware of their internal gender identity since an early age: "How does a social constructionist like me explain this without dishonoring those narratives? How can it be that a

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[29] Carolyn J. Sharp, *Wrestling the Word: The Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Believer* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 122.
[30] Tonstad, 60.

ten-year-old has somehow been socialized into a gender identity that belies his/her body? I don't know."[31] This is a question that is not easily resolved.

There remains a tension between queer theory's description of the performativity of gender and understandings of gender identity that assume an internal essence that can be known—including the definition of gender identity that I offer earlier in this chapter. It may seem that in this chapter I have described a conceptual system, only to chip away at its foundations by exploring the challenges of gender theory. In a way, that is not entirely off the mark. Part of the approach of queer criticism is to destabilize and call into question what had been assumed to be solid—including our definitions and understandings of gender. And yet, ultimately, I do not set forth this deconstruction in an effort to assert that the concepts of gender are hopelessly indescribable or meaningless. Rather, my hope is to demonstrate the lively debates taking place in this field.[32] It is an area of complexification, nuance, and growth, even when its tensions and paradoxes remain apparent.

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[31] Allen, 120.

[32] For a more thorough account of several debates in the field, see Susannah Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology*, *Controversies in Contextual Theology Series* (London: SCM Press, 2011).

Each of the competing voices in this conversation can help congregations and individuals as they seek to understand gender in a nuanced, faithful way. Therefore, it is not my intention in this thesis to select one argument as the one correct answer to our societal questions about gender. Rather, I hope to enter thoughtfully into the conversation and learn from the various voices that are speaking, while also drawing ancient voices into the mix. Deborah Sawyer points to the Bible as one critical place where identity categories are constructed, yet even here, the story is not so simple. Sawyer highlights Butler's insight that there is not only a single voice speaking: "the institutions, practices and discourses that construct identity are themselves multiple and diffuse with their own histories."[33] When the Bible is consulted to provide insight on matters of gender (or anything else), it does not bring only a single perspective. Rather, the Bible is richly textured with multiple voices. Therefore, before turning to specific passages of Scripture in the chapters that follow, it is helpful first to provide some background about the approach we will be taking.

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[33] Deborah F. Sawyer, *God, Gender and the Bible* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 9.

A Note on Biblical Interpretation

In an article entitled "The Emancipatory Work of Interpretation," Walter Brueggemann reflects on the task of biblical interpretation. Writing specifically about texts relevant to LGBTQ+ concerns, Brueggemann contrasts "texts of rigor" that seem critical of LGBTQ+ people and practices with "texts of welcome" that demand inclusion. Analyzing these various passages, he observes, "It is impossible to harmonize the mandates to exclusion in Leviticus 18:22, 20:23, and Deuteronomy 23:1 with the welcome stance of Isaiah 56, Matthew 11:29-20, Galatians 3:28, and Acts 10."[34] Brueggemann, however, is not troubled by this lack of agreement, nor is he surprised by it. In fact, contending that this is the very nature of Scripture, he urges interpreters to "start with the awareness that the Bible does not speak with a single voice on any topic. Inspired by God as it is, all sorts of persons have a say in the complexity of scripture, and we are under mandate to listen, as best we can, to all of its voices."[35] The Bible, rich and complex as it is, contains multiple perspectives and allows for multiple voices to speak, even when they do not neatly align.

[34] Walter Brueggemann, "The Emancipatory Work of Interpretation," August 26, 2022, accessed March 1, 2023, https://churchanew.org/brueggemann/the-emancipatory-work-of-interpretation.
[35] Brueggemann, "The Emancipatory Work of Interpretation."

The multiplicity of voices in the biblical text presents a challenge to interpreters, to be sure, yet it also presents an opportunity to engage honestly with the ambiguity and uncertainties of reality. Noting the different strands of narrative found in the early chapters of the Bible, Carolyn Sharp writes that these multiple voices—known to scholars as J, E, P, and D—drive us deeper into the mystery of God: "The frictions and creative tensions among multiple witnesses to God's truth require that the attentive reader move beyond idolatrous reification of any one particular view of God or mode of engagement with God. God's truth is beyond human comprehension."[36] Likewise, when it comes to matters of gender and sexuality, the diversity of voices in Scripture mirrors the diversity of perspectives found in many contemporary congregations, where these questions are not easily resolved.

Nonetheless, the presence of multiple voices does not mean that we are hopelessly adrift, nor does it mean that each perspective is equally ordained by God. Brueggemann makes a distinction between the Bible and the Gospel: "The Gospel is *not to be confused with or identified with the Bible.* The Bible contains all sorts of voices that are inimical to the good news of God's love, mercy, and justice. … The gospel, unlike the Bible, is unambiguous about God's deep love

[36] Sharp, 60-61.

for all peoples."[37] This distinction does not remove the challenge of faithful interpretation, but it does remind us that not all voices carry equal weight.

An analogy from Linn Marie Tonsad makes the point well. Tonstad invites us to reflect on the institution of slavery, a system that few people today would consider compatible with the Gospel. And yet, without getting into the specifics of the historical debates, it is important to recognize that both opponents and supporters of slavery used the Bible to reinforce their claims, and neither was forced to twist its words out of context. As Tonstad puts it, "On the textual level, the Bible has no difficulty with slavery as such."[38] Many passages in the Bible discuss slavery without raising any concerns about the practice. Other passages, of course, lend support to the idea of abolishing slavery. Interpreters must choose which voices to prioritize and which to contextualize, understanding them as a product of their time. Tonstad's insight is that few people today wrestle with this issue today, an insight with important implications for our approach to biblical interpretation:

> Generally, people don't need to give all kinds of reasons why slavery is wrong, nor do they spend any time wrestling with the biblical passages that endorse slavery. Similarly, once one recognizes that there are no good reasons to believe that it's wrong to be gay, trans*, intersex, queer, or nonbinary, one doesn't need to keep coming up with arguments dealing

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[37] Brueggemann, "The Emancipatory Work of Interpretation."
[38] Tonstad, 22.

> with the biblical passages that some interpret differently. Instead, one can get on with other issues.[39]

There is a place for apologetics, to be sure, but there is also a time to move beyond such defensive argumentation. In this thesis, the focus will not primarily be about arguing with exclusionary voices, though they are loudly present in our society and find voices of support within Scripture. We will instead inhabit a different position in the conversation, attempting to "get on with other issues," as Tonstad suggests. In this thesis, we will listen to the ancient voices found in Scripture, discovering how their perspectives on gender can illuminate the conversations we are having today.

In closing, it is important to acknowledge at the outset of this thesis that contemporary perspectives on gender are not explicitly present in the Bible. Surely these ancient authors would be just as confused as many people are today by contemporary terminology. The concepts outlined earlier in this chapter are simply not how they understood gender, and we must be clear about this fact. And yet, this does not mean that such an understanding of gender is *forbidden* by the Bible, or that it is *against* the Bible. It simply means that such an understanding was foreign to the experience of ancient people—just as they had

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[39] Tonstad, 23-24.

no understanding that germs cause disease, that Earth orbits the sun, or that electricity can power lights. Contemporary views on gender are "unbiblical" in the same way that pizza, socks, and North America are unbiblical, meaning merely that they are not in the Bible. This does not mean, however, that they are "unbiblical" in the sense of being anti-Biblical. They simply came later.

Likewise, just as scientific advances changed the way we understand the world around us, centuries of study have also advanced the way we understand human beings—including, but not limited to, gender. Ancient people had no understanding of neurotransmitters and the chemical makeup of the brain, but the absence of this content in Scripture does not invalidate or prohibit the use of medications that effectively treat mental health conditions like anxiety and depression. A similar argument can be made about gender. Although contemporary understandings of gender are not explained in the pages of the Bible, this does not mean they are contrary to the Gospel. It simply means that these are our questions to study and consider, not theirs. And yet, even with the historical distance between the Bible and this modern conversation, we find that the Bible is not irrelevant to our questions. On the contrary, the voices found in Scripture make a vital contribution to the conversations taking place in congregations today. As we turn now to the opening chapters of Genesis, we do

so not to uncover a singular perspective that provides simple answer to our questions, but rather to listen well to diverse, ancient voices that continue to enrich our conversations about gender.

Chapter 2: Gender in Genesis

The creation of the world, vividly recounted in the opening chapters of Genesis, has provided fertile ground for theological reflection for as long as these stories have been passed down, and rightly so. Describing the creation of the world, Genesis affords its readers the opportunity to consider God's intentions for the created order, including God's intentions for humanity. For this reason, Genesis provides a resource for congregations seeking to understand how to respond faithfully to the issues they face. Today, as many churches seek to navigate a shifting societal understanding of gender, it is fruitful to return to these foundational texts for insight into the complicated questions that arise. In this chapter, we will consider the Genesis creation accounts from several angles, exploring how these ancient words shed light on the concept of gender and how we are to make sense of "male and female" in the biblical narrative and in our contemporary society.

In the four sections of this chapter, I hope to illustrate how the complex, open-ended, and ultimately spacious portrayal of humanity in Genesis provides a resource for contemporary readers seeking to understand gender beyond an oversimple, fixed binary. We begin by examining the creation of humanity in

Genesis 1:26-28, analyzing the language of this passage and discovering the ways in which it is artistically open-ended. Next, we consider what it means for humanity to be created male and female in the image of God, both for our understanding of God and for our understanding of human gender. We then hold the creation of "male and female" alongside the binary pairs in the other days of creation, showing how these earlier dualistic categories invite us to broaden our understanding of the gender binary when it appears in verse 27. Finally, we examine the second telling of humanity's creation, observing that Genesis 2-3 does not inevitably establish traditional gender roles; instead, we find in these verses an egalitarian vision that speaks to humanity's need for companionship and community. Taken together, these observations reveal that the opening chapters of Genesis, rather than constricting the possibilities of gender to a narrow understanding of male and female, provide a rich and beautiful vision of God as the source of all that is, including the wondrous diversity of gender that is found in God's creation.

SPACIOUS AMBIGUITY IN GENESIS 1:26-28

Genesis narrates the creation of the world from two perspectives, one in the first chapter and the other in chapters 2-3, both of which include references to

gender as part of creation. We turn first to the opening chapter of Genesis, described by scholars as the Priestly account of creation. As the days of creation unfold, an orderly cosmos comes into focus with God at its center. Human beings enter the story in verses 26-28, where we now direct our attention. Here, on the sixth day, God says, "Let us make humanity in our image, according to our likeness."[1] As God has spoken, so it comes to be:

> And God created humanity in his image;
> In God's image God created him;
> Male and female God created them.[2]

These thirteen Hebrew words, foundational to our understanding of humanity and our relationship with God, are nevertheless enigmatic. They are poetic words, open to interpretation—requiring interpretation. Indeed, throughout history these words have been the site for theological debate as long as they have been retold.

Central to the question at hand is the translation of one particular Hebrew word, *hā-'ādām*, which appears multiple times in the text. In my translation above, I have chosen the word "humanity," while older translations have selected "man" or "mankind," among other options. Of its use in this passage,

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[1] Genesis 1:26, my translation.
[2] Genesis 1:27, my translation.

Gerhard von Rad writes, “The Hebrew word ‘*adam* (‘man’) is a collective and is therefore never used in the plural; it means literally ‘mankind.’”[3] Complicating matters is that this same word is used later in Genesis as the proper name Adam. At times this is unambiguously the case, such as when Genesis 5:3 describes how Adam becomes the father of Seth at age 130. Yet in Genesis 1, the same word seems to describe humanity as a whole. Then, in Genesis 2, *hā-'ādām* is used repeatedly (with its definite article) to mean “the man”[4] when referring to the first human being in the Garden of Eden. Eventually, the meaning shifts from “the man” to the proper name Adam, but it is unclear precisely when this happens. Different translations transition from “man” to “Adam” at several different points in the narrative.[5] Thus, this same Hebrew word can have three meanings here: humanity as a whole, a male individual, or the proper name Adam.[6] Which *hā-'ādām* is God creating in Genesis 1:26-28?

To answer this question, it helps to look at other grammatical markers in the text, particularly whether corresponding pronouns are singular or plural. Intriguingly, we find an alternation of both. In verse 26, after God decides to

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[3] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, *Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 55.

[4] Or “the earth creature,” as will be discussed later in this chapter.

[5] Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 353.

[6] Miguel A. De La Torre, *Genesis*, *Belief* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 21-22.

make *'ādām* (no definite article) in God's image, God goes on to say, "and let *them* have dominion…", using a plural pronoun. This seems to imply that *'ādām* refers not to a single individual named Adam but to humanity in general, all of whom are created in God's image and given dominion over the animals of the earth. However, verse 27 uses a singular pronoun to refer to humanity, followed immediately by a plural one: "And God created humanity (*hā-'ādām*) in his image; in God's image God created him; male and female God created them." Sometimes *hā-'ādām* is referenced by the singular pronoun "him," and other times it is referenced by the plural pronoun "them."

This variance is not a single aberration. We find the same plurality used alongside *'ādām* even more strikingly when Genesis 5 recounts the creation in its opening two verses:

> On the day God created humanity (*'ādām*),
> In God's likeness God made him;
> Male and female God made them,
> And blessed them,
> And called their name *'ādām* on the day they were created.[7]

Notice in particular this fascinating final line, in which God calls *their* (plural) name *'ādām*, used here without the definite article. While the King James Version uses Adam here as the name God gives them, most translations choose a

[7] Genesis 5:1b-2, my translation.

collective noun for human beings. The NRSVue translation uses the word "humans": "When God created humans, he made them in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and called them humans when they were created."[8] Here, at least, *'ādām* is the name given to male and female humanity.

Noting the alternation of singular and plural grammatical forms, Phyllis Trible argues that "*hā-'ādām* is not one single creature who is both male and female but rather two creatures, one male and one female."[9] Similarly, readers may understand the "them" of these verses as a reference to Adam and Eve, connecting this creation account with the material coming in Genesis 2-3, which we will examine below. This would explain why plural pronouns are used. Other interpreters, as we have seen above, hear in these verses a reference to all of humanity. Which is correct? Does God create an original man named Adam, an original pair of man and woman, or all humanity as a whole?

Rather than answering this question by choosing a side and arguing for it, my contention is that the text itself resists any single conclusion. The variations

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[8] Genesis 5:1b-2, New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue). Unless otherwise indicated, Biblical quotations in this paper are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

[9] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 18.

within it are not included as a problem for readers to solve but as a reflection of the incomprehensible nature of the subject at hand. The inconsistencies of singular and plural grammatical forms, the multiple meanings associated with the word *hā-'ādām*—these are a feature, not a bug. These texts are written in precisely this way because they resist the mastery of any single interpretation. When it comes to the creation of humanity—when it comes to the very nature of who human beings are—we are pressing the limits of human language and comprehension. Different readers may come to different conclusions, and that in itself is cause for wonder: how remarkable it is that this degree of ambiguity hovers around such a foundational text!

Genesis 1 leaves room for mystery and awe, requiring humility from its readers. And it does so because these verses, while interesting to us for their lessons about gender, are ultimately verses about the nature of the God in whose image we are made. God, too, is depicted in grammatically varied ways. Even the name used regularly for God, *Ĕlōhīm*, has a plural grammatical form. God speaks with plural pronouns in verse 26 ("Let us make humanity in our image…") before being described with singular pronouns and verb forms in verse 27. Speaking in verse 29, God uses the singular pronoun, "I have given…". Trible sees a deep significance here: "The switch from plural to singular pronouns

signifies variety, freedom, and fullness within God."[10] God will not be pinned down, even by our words. God cannot be confined by human language.

Is it any surprise, then, that the human beings created in God's image similarly evade attempts at neat description and classification? The first chapter of Genesis depicts the creation of the cosmos in a beautiful, orderly way, yet it does not do so by constraining our imagination into strict, limiting categories. Rather, the text retains an open-ended quality that leaves room for a rich array of interpretations. This is certainly true in its depiction of God. Noting the alternation of singular and plural forms, Justin Sabia-Tanis observes, "despite the appearance of a world ordered and sustained by exclusive and fixed definitions, God's own blurred and slipping self-definition suggests that things might be otherwise."[11] This foundational text does not answer all of our questions. In fact, it raises many new questions for us about the nature of the human beings God has created and how they may also evade simple definition. Specifically, the project at hand invites us to consider what it means for humanity to be created as "male and female," particularly as this relates to creation in the image of God. What does this passage mean for our understanding of human gender and

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[10] Trible, 21.

[11] Justin Sabia-Tanis, *Trans-Gender: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 57.

sexuality? And what does it mean for our understanding of God? It is to these questions that we now turn.

CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

The concept of *imago Dei*, the image of God, is a rich and expansive subject, far surpassing the scope of this project. It speaks to the depths of theological anthropology: what does it mean to be a human being? Throughout history, it has been understood in a variety of different, often conflicting, ways.[12] For the sake of this study, our focus will be on the ways that the *imago Dei* illuminates our understanding of gender, particularly as drawn out in Genesis 1. Shannon Craigo-Snell summarizes well the implications of this concept: "The biblical assertion that men and women are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) is fundamentally egalitarian, affirming that all people are intimately related to God."[13] To see how this takes shape, let us return again to the text of Genesis 1:27, which poetically describes the creation of humanity in God's image:

> And God created humanity in his image;
> In God's image God created him;

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[12] See Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Sexism and Misgyny in the Christian Tradition: Liberating Alternatives," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 34 (2014), https://www.jstor.org/stable/24801355.

[13] Shannon Craigo-Snell, "Image of God: Contemporary Feminist and Liberation Theological Views," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, ed. Daniel Patte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 585.

Male and female God created them.[14]

Of particular importance is the parallelism found in the last two lines. Analyzing the Hebrew poetry, Phyllis Trible notes the significance of the repetition here: "Clearly, 'male and female' correspond structurally to 'the image of God,' and this formal parallelism indicates a semantic correspondence. "[15] In other words, the repetition in this poetic structure suggests a connection between "male and female" and "in God's image." Creation as male and female is not incidental to the creation account; it indicates something about the image of God. God creates humanity in the divine image as male and female.

One interpretive possibility is to understand the text refusing to locate the image of God in any one individual. Walter Brueggemann takes this approach, suggesting that God is "not mirrored as an individual but as a community."[16] In this reading, humanity's truest identity as formed in the image of God can only be found collectively, looking at all humanity, male and female. This is a helpful reading, yet there is more to consider. After all, this connection illuminates not only human nature but also the nature of God.[17] If humans are created male and

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[14] Genesis 1:27, my translation.

[15] Trible, 17.

[16] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, *Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 34.

[17] Miguel De La Torres notes the implications of this connection: "Creating man in God's own image reveals as much about God as it does about humans." De La Torre, 20.

female in the image of God, then somehow male and female must serve as an apt descriptor for God. What might it mean to make such a claim?

One way to understand this connection would be to say that God is both male and female. Indeed, this is a natural conclusion to make, and many commentators of Genesis take this approach. Terence Fretheim notes the egalitarian impulse here, arguing that this passage teaches "that the female images the divine as much as the male."[18] In a similar vein, Miguel De La Torre goes further to draw a conclusion about God: "For humanity, consisting of male and female, to be created in the image of God means that God is male and female; God is our Father and our Mother."[19] Such a statement may seem radical to those accustomed to hearing God described only with masculine language, and it is true that masculine terminology and metaphors for God far outnumber female ones within the biblical text. Nevertheless, the representation of God as both male and female does reflect biblical portrayals of God, even within the first chapter of Genesis. Womanist Bible scholar Wilda Gafney, noting that the Spirit of God is presented in Genesis 1:2 with a feminine grammatical form, explains the gender implications beautifully: "She, the Spirit of God, She-who-is-also-

[18] Fretheim, 345.

[19] De La Torre, 22. As we shall see, he proceeds to explain that God is also more than these two binary categories can convey.

God, at the dawn of creation fluttered over the nest of her creation at the same time as He, the more familiar expression of divinity, created all. … God is female and male, and when God gets around to creating creatures in the divine image, they will be female and male, as God is."[20] From the opening verses of the Bible, the portrayal of God is not only male.

These insights are a significant and successful contribution of feminist and womanist biblical scholarship, helping to depatriarchalize the interpretive perception of the God of the Bible, lifting up feminine portrayals alongside the masculine images that have more commonly been used in liturgy and practice.[21] For instance, Phyllis Trible identifies passages that "depict Yahweh poetically as a deity who conceived, was pregnant, writhed in labor pains, brought forth a child and nursed it."[22] Highlighting these portrayals helps enrich our understanding of the God in whose image we are made, male and female. It is a necessary corrective to lift up female imagery alongside the male imagery that has traditionally been emphasized. And yet, care must be taken here not to emerge from this text with a conception of God with two faces, one male and one

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[20] Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 20.
[21] For an excellent theological consideration of the gendered language for God in the Anglican liturgy, see Kathryn Tanner, "Gender," in *The Oxford Handbook of Anglican Studies*, ed. Mark D. Chapman, Sathianathan Clarke, and Martyn Percy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
[22] Trible, 201.

female. After all, the Bible also uses nongendered language to refer to God, such as statements that God is a rock, a fortress, or alpha and omega, terms that do not generally have a gendered connotation. God is not "male" or "female" in the same ways that human beings typically describe themselves. Neither term adequately describes the nature of God, nor do the two words together. God is beyond either category, and God is more than just these two realities combined into one.

Somehow, male and female reflect the image of God, yet it would be a mistake to describe God as literally male or literally female. Rosemary Radford Ruether reminds us of the limitations of any description of God: "Feminist liberation theology draws on the Christian tradition that all our metaphors for God are only partial pointers to the reality of God that transcends our language. To take any images for God literally is idolatry."[23] The gender of God, if we are to say such a thing, is paradoxical and mysterious, broader than any words can describe. Scriptural texts freely describe God using imagery that is in turn masculine, feminine, and nongendered. Male and female can be accurately said to describe God, but God is not confined by those terms. Miguel De La Torre aptly captures the paradox of this reality: "So God is male and female. God is not

[23] Ruether, 93.

male and God is not female. God is everything between male and female, and God is beyond maleness and femaleness."[24] God's refusal to be confined by gender categories points to the transcendence of a God who is beyond any human-imposed categories.[25]

Even as it does so, however, it also accentuates the limitations the categories themselves. Male and female somehow describe God, but not exactly. For human beings created in the image of God, might the same also be true? Virginia Mollenkott argues that the portrayal of God as male and female undercuts the gender binary itself: "God is not literally male and female and neither is the human race."[26] For human beings to be made in the image of God means that they share in God's transcendence of simplistic gender categories. God encompasses and transcends "male and female," even as these words do somehow reflect the image of God. Likewise, human beings may describe themselves as male or female—or as a combination of male and female—yet these words do not serve as constrictive definitions of human experience that adequately describe all that is. Human beings are created in the image of a God

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[24] De La Torre, 23.

[25] Phyllis Trible's interpretation of Genesis 1:27 is that it witnesses "to the transcendent Creator who is neither male nor female nor a combination of the two. Only in the context of this Otherness can we truly perceive the image of God male *and* female." Trible, 201.

[26] Virginia R. Mollenkott, *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach*, Rev. and expanded ed. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), 100.

who somehow both is and is not "male and female," which serves to destabilize and call into question the categories themselves.

This is a place where the Church has much to learn from its trans and nonbinary members. While it may seem hard to conceptualize how God can be both male and female—and also neither male nor female—there are many among us who have experience in this very reality. As Justin Sabia-Tanis writes,

> Transgendered people also have a unique opportunity to witness to the gender of God. We who embody more than one gender within our lifetimes have learned something about our ability to hold both of those spaces within one body. If we, as human beings, can do it, surely God can do it.[27]

Sabia-Tanis is right to highlight the contribution that gender-expansive individuals make within their faith communities, helping expand the collective imagination for how gender categories can be transcended. This is a valuable aid for anyone seeking to better understand God. Simultaneously, developing this understanding of God is a supportive practice to affirm and validate the experience of trans and nonbinary people: "understanding God as both male and female, or neither male nor female, can be liberating for someone who seems him/herself as becoming like God, who is both/neither, and should enhance a

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[27] Sabia-Tanis, 134.

sense of self-worth."[28] In this way, exploring and highlighting the ways that God is beyond gender contributes to the health and well-being of trans people, even as it helps everyone to better understand the God in whose image, male and female, we are made.

ONE BINARY AMONG MANY

Thus far our attention has been focused on the final paragraph of Genesis 1, examining in detail the verses in which humanity is created by God. However, to fully appreciate what it means that God has created humankind as "male and female," it is helpful to consider this phrase in the context of the entire first chapter of Genesis, for this phrase is not introduced in a vacuum. As the creation story unfolds, the narrator paints a picture of order emerging out of chaos. From the swirling commotion of the formless void in Genesis 1, gradually God separates and organizes the elements into a coherent created order. Lest we overstate the point, Deryn Guest provides a helpful reminder that God is also present in the swirling chaos, an indication that God—and by implication, those

[28] Sabia-Tanis, 136.

made in God's image—cannot be bound within well-ordered boundaries.[29] On the whole, however, the passage relates the gradual establishment of order, a message that is reinforced by the meticulous style in which the narrative is presented. Each day is described according to a fixed pattern, which biblical scholars attribute to the care and precision of the Priestly source.[30]

At the heart of this process is a pattern of separation and classification: light is separated from darkness, the waters above from the waters below, the dry land from the sea.[31] With these distinctions drawn, a well-ordered world comes into focus. Finally, on the sixth day, humanity is created in the image of God, and a final pair of words is introduced: male and female. It is worth noting that this duality is not drawn out in as much detail as, say, the contrast between the sun to rule the day and the moon to rule the night; male and female are not presented in such oppositional terms. However, the arrival of male and female as a corresponding pair makes sense at the conclusion of this long litany of separating the elements of creation into pairs. As we seek to understand the

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[29] Deryn Guest, "Troubling the Waters: תהום, Transgender, and Reading Genesis Backwards," in *Transgender, Intersex, and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Teresa J. Hornsby and Deryn Guest (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 21-22.
[30] Carolyn Sharp notes that the Priestly witness also invites our attention to the ways that this "divine creativity may be honored and responded to in liturgy and ritual observance." See Sharp, 61.
[31] Hartke, 50.

meaning and implications of this "male and female" dichotomy, much can be learned by holding this pair alongside the other pairs from the earlier days of creation.

Day and Night, Land and Sea

On the first day God separates the light from the darkness, creating day and night.[32] This distinction is clear-cut and easy to understand. Similarly, on the third day God separates the waters from the dry land, naming the resulting areas the land and the sea. Again, the distinction is plainly apparent. And yet, scholars reading this passage have noted that both of these divisions are more complicated than they initially appear.[33] The day and night do not alternate with the flipping of a switch. Instead, there is a gradual transition between them. Dawn and dusk bring moments when it is not entirely clear whether it is "day" or "night"; there is a liminal space of convergence in between. The same is true with the sea and the dry land. The rise and fall of the tides produces an area that is sometimes land and sometimes sea.[34] Likewise, saltwater marshes are an area

[32] Genesis 1:3-5.
[33] Sabia-Tanis, 57-58.
[34] Sabia-Tanis, 57-58.

where land and sea overlap. It would not make sense to say that marshes are "land" or that they are "sea"; by definition, they are the overlap of both.

Applying this insight to the concept of gender, Austen Hartke quotes a minister named Reverend M Barclay (they/them), who sees a clear implication of the existence of these realities: "These verses don't mean 'there's only land and water, and there's nowhere where these two meet.' These binaries aren't meant to speak to all of reality—they invite us into thinking about everything between and beyond."[35] Likewise, speaking of male and female does not require us to conceive of two discrete categories at a distance from one another. Instead, as with day and night or land and sea, we can recognize the existence of the two classifications while also recognizing that some people may find themselves not at either extreme but somewhere in between. Justin Sabia-Tanis says it well: "In the story of Genesis, even while God was creating apparent opposites, God also created liminal spaces in which the elements of creation overlap and merge. Surely the same could be said about the creation of humanity with people occupying many places between the poles of female and male in a way similar to the rest of creation."[36] Indeed, many people understand their gender not as

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[35] Quoted in Hartke, 51.
[36] Sabia-Tanis, 58.

"female" or "male" but as existing somewhere in between. Such a conception of gender is not denied by Genesis 1:27 any more than dusk is forbidden by Genesis 1:4-5. This is simply how the narrative summarizes reality.

Waters Above and Waters Below

The distinctions between day and night and between land and sea demonstrate binaries with room for overlap in between. The second day of creation presents a different kind of contrast. Here, God creates a dome over the earth, calling it the sky, and then separates the waters above the dome from those below. This is a moment in the creation narrative that can seem confusing, even bizarre, to modern readers. It reflects a cosmological understanding of the world that is different from our own. Biblical scholar Terence Fretheim explains that ancient readers believed the sky to be a solid dome, which "provided living space between the waters above (the source of rain and snow, flowing through windows, 7:11) and the waters on and below the earth."[37] Contemporary readers hold a quite different view of how the earth and sky are composed, yet this day of creation remains a part of our sacred tradition.

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[37] Fretheim, 344.

Even with a different scientific understanding that has arisen over the centuries, we can still recognize the reasoning in this passage, noticing how it accounts for the blue sky over the earth and the rain that falls from the sky to join with the waters on and below the earth's surface. Few would argue that the Bible requires its readers to insist on an ocean of water hovering above a solid firmament of sky. This was a provisional explanation that reflected an earlier understanding of the world. When examining the narrative, modern readers can still follow its reasoning and listen for instruction, even as science has progressed in new directions. Might the same be true of gender? The distinction between male and female has long helped humanity to understand the world and one another, but in recent years our understanding of gender has grown more complex.

At times we must concede that our understanding of gender, like everything else, is only provisional. For instance, new parents might have a "gender reveal party" for their child to share their child's gender as they perceive it, and they may choose a name corresponding to that gender. And yet, as this child begins to grow, they may learn that their assumptions were not entirely correct. Interestingly, some parents have begun attempting to raise young children in an entirely gender-neutral way without sharing their gender

publicly,[38] yet this remains an atypical position. Most parents rely on biological sex to predict their child's gender identity, even if this is a provisional understanding that may come to change over time.

Contemporary readers of Genesis witness on creation's second day a provisional account of the composition of the sky, one that is now understood as a vestige of a former age. And yet, readers continue to return to this text, and it continues to provide instruction and insight. For the purposes of this study, we find here another lesson about how contemporary Christian readers might view male and female. Unlike with land and sea, where two distinct elements are separated, in this instance the sky separates "the waters" from "the waters." The same substance is divided into two places, one above and one below, yet they had originally been the same waters. There is not an inherent difference between the type of waters that are above and those that are below; they are both simply "waters."

Considering this idea alongside the concepts of male and female, readers might ask whether there is a consequential difference between the substance of what is called male and what is called female. Are these inherently different, or

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[38] Maddy Savage, "The Parents Raising Their Children without Gender," *BBC News*, October 3, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220929-the-parents-raising-their-children-without-gender.

at their core are they the same? We will return to this question when we examine how the creation is depicted in Genesis 2-3, noting this passage's emphasis on equality and correspondence between male and female. Additionally, in the following chapter we will consider the work of Gregory of Nyssa, who does not view the division of humanity into male and female as a meaningful, fundamental distinction but as a temporary concession in light of the Fall. These are complicated issues. What we find on creation's second day, however, is that separation need not mean inherent difference.

The Sun and the Moon

Continuing our journey through the days of creation, we turn now to day four, where God creates sun, moon, and stars: "God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars."[39] The dichotomy of sun and moon seems pretty clear. There are two great lights in the sky, one that appears during the day and the other at night—simple. As we linger on this verse, however, several interesting observations can be made. First, human beings have learned in the intervening centuries since the writing of Genesis that the moon does shine light of its own. Any light that the

[39] Genesis 1:16, NRSVue.

moon provides is actually light from the sun, reflected onto the earth by the moon. In keeping with the preceding discussion of the waters above and the waters below, the light from the sun and the light from the moon has the same origin. It is the same light, arriving in a different form.

A second observation has to do with the nature of the moon. While the sun is a steadfast ruler of the day, marking its beginning and ending with its rise and fall, the moon does not serve this role for the night. At times the moon does shine brightly at night, lighting up the earth almost as clearly as the day. Yet at other times it can be seen during the day, and sometimes it disappears altogether. The moon is fluid, constantly changing and constantly in motion. Just because it is described alongside the sun to rule over the night and the day, the moon does not remain neatly in the night. In a similar way, when it comes to gender identity, some people do not experience gender as a fixed, unchanging quality. Some describe their gender identity as fluid, moving and changing over time.[40] The moon provides a reminder for us that fluctuation is a normal, original feature of God's creation.

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[40] For stories of transgender people in their own words, two resources among many are Leanne McCall Tigert and Maren C. Tirabassi, *Transgendering Faith: Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2004); and Virginia R. Mollenkott and Vanessa Sheridan, *Transgender Journeys* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003).

Third, let us turn our attention briefly to the closing words verse 16, seemingly included almost as an afterthought: “and the stars.” God places the sun and the moon in the sky, ruling over the day and the night, as verse 18 declares, yet these two celestial bodies are not the only sources of light in the sky. They are the largest and brightest, to be sure. But sun and moon are not the only two entities. There are also stars. The single binary of sun and moon does not encompass all that exists in the sky. Might it be that male and female are not exhaustive options either? Male and female may be the largest, most prominent classifications of human gender, just as sun and moon dominate the sky. And yet, there are stars. A minority of people experience gender in a different way that does not fit into either of the usual categories. The presence of stars can serve as a reminder that sometimes even when a binary seems evident, other possibilities remain.

Animals of the Sea, Sky, and Land

Finally, we consider days five and six of the creation, when all types of animals are created. Setting aside the creation of humanity for now, we see that animals are created in several broad categories. On the fifth day, God creates the living creatures in the sea and the birds of the air. Then, on day six, God creates

animals on the earth, grouped in three ways: "God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind and the cattle of every kind and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind."[41] Taken together with the birds and sea creatures from day five, these three groups of land animals convey the entirety of the animal kingdom. And yet, the animal kingdom is broad and diverse, occasionally bizarre. Scientists today have developed much more elaborate taxonomies to classify various types of animals, yet there remain outliers that are hard to pin down. For instance, consider bats (mammals that fly), penguins (birds that do not fly), or the infamous duck-billed platypus (a mammal that lays eggs). Some species of newts are born in the water, then live on land for a few years, and then return to the water to live out their lives aquatically. Where does such a creature belong in the classifications that Genesis sets forth? Is the newt created on day five with the creatures of the waters or in day six with the creatures of the land?

Perhaps it is obvious that such a question misses the point of the text. The author of Genesis does not set out to describe a taxonomy of the animal kingdom. The point is to convey that God created all the living things of the earth. The division of land, sky, and sea creatures is not intended to set forth exhaustive, exclusive categories to which every animal must be assigned. Rather,

[41] Genesis 1:25a, NRSVue.

these generalizations are a simplified, artful way to express that all the great diversity of creation was made by God.

The proposal at hand is to extend this way of reading further into the sixth day of creation, past the three-fold division of land animals to where humanity, male and female, is created by God. If we are able to understand that the typology of animals is meant to convey the breadth of God's creation, rather than imposing exclusive boundaries around the types of animals that exist, can we not take the same approach to gender? "Male and female" can be understood here as expressing the entirety of humanity.[42] As with the animals, the point is that God created all human beings, and God created them in the divine image.

One frequently-encountered inference from Genesis 1:27 is that male and female, established here by God, are the only two possibilities for human gender. Such arguments are commonly presented in more conservative settings.[43] And yet, does this accurately reflect the content and emphasis of the text? Granted, Genesis does not explicitly describe other types of gender identity, but it does not

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[42] Tara Soughers puts it well: "Male and female may have been the storytellers' way of indicating all people, just as day and night meant all parts of the day, and water and dry land meant all parts of our world." Tara K. Soughers, *Beyond a Binary God: A Theology for Trans* Allies* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018), 73.

[43] For a prominent example of this perspective, see the fifth chapter of the book by Andrew Walker, a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, presenting what he calls the "Genesis Blueprint": Andrew T. Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate* (The Good Book Company, 2022).

forbid them either. An equally plausible reading is to hear the reference to "male and female" as a comprehensive phrase meant to convey that all humanity is made by God. Such figures of speech abound in Scriptural texts and in everyday language. For instance, when the prophet Joel says that sons and daughters, young and old, will prophesy, the point is not to forbid middle-aged people from prophesying, nor is it to say that the spirit rests only on "sons" and "daughters." The core message from God, vividly rendered, is made plain: "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh."[44] Likewise when passages refer to north, south, east, and west,[45] it would be an odd interpretation indeed to say that this excludes the northeast or southwest or areas in the center. Rather, such formulations convey the limitless scope of God's activity. It is the same way a speaker might refer to "young and old," "rich and poor," "tall and short," or any other pair of contrasting terms as a way of indicating everyone—even though in all of those categorizations, people also lie in the middle.

Reading Genesis 1:27, then, the reference to male and female need not be read as a delineation of the only two possibilities for gender. Instead, it is perfectly reasonable that these verses are stating that God made all of humanity

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[44] Joel 2:28, NRSVue.

[45] Among others, see Isaiah 43:5-6, Genesis 28:14, or Luke 13:29.

in God's image, not issuing pronouncements about gender identity. Indeed, this breadth and completeness is the message encountered throughout the first chapter of Genesis, as a litany of word pairs indicates the comprehensive scope of God's activity. We find in the creation narratives a witness to the expensiveness of creation—day and night, land and sea, sun and moon, birds and sea creatures and land animals, male and female—all understood as the handiwork of God. Churches and individuals seeking to understand gender beyond a binary can read these verses and rightly ask: what is to prevent us from doing the same with gender? Witnessing the existence of male and female and gender identities between them and beyond, we can marvel at the expensiveness of human gender and sexuality, recognizing within it the spacious, imaginative handiwork of God.

MADE FOR ONE ANOTHER: GENDER IN GENESIS 2-3

Up to this point, our attention has been on the first chapter of Genesis, traditionally described by scholars as the Priestly account of creation. Before leaving the subject of gender in Genesis, it is worthwhile for us to consider briefly the second account of the creation story as presented by the Jahwist account in Genesis 2-3. Noting the differences between these two stories, Carolyn

Sharp notes that while the Priestly source provides "testimony to the expansive cosmic scope of God's creative action" and "ancient reflections on a world that was elegantly structured,"[46] the Jahwist provides a different kind of storytelling with vivid details about "a God who creates out of dust, who talks with Adam and Eve, who argues with Abraham; a God who is known in the messiness and process and tensions of intimate relationship."[47] Indeed, when we arrive at Genesis 2:4b, the tone shifts abruptly, transitioning from systematic pronouncements about the cosmos to a lively personal story that takes place in a garden. Here, the story is marked by dialogue between rich and interesting characters.

The importance of these chapters in the history of Christian thought can hardly be overstated. Theological conceptions of original sin, the fall, and humanity's relationship to the created order all draw on these chapters. Our present focus, however, is on the way that gender is portrayed in these verses, particularly as modern readers have begun to rethink traditional understandings of male and female. Frankly, the historical interpretations of this text have often

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[46] Sharp, 61.
[47] Sharp, 62.

been harmful.[48] In his commentary on Genesis, Miguel A. De La Torre says it plainly: "the fact remains that these verses have successfully been used throughout history to subjugate women, no matter how much we care to protest its historical misuse."[49] Is there another way?

Walter Brueggemann rejects the type of reading that locates in these verses an endorsement of male superiority. He writes,

> Like so much other disservice drawn from this text, the narrative has been used to justify the subordination of women, first because the woman is created derivatively (it is argued) and second, because she is the temptress of the man (it is argued). Such exegesis betrays the text and is a good example of the ways our values and presuppositions control our exegesis.[50]

As Brueggemann makes clear, a reading of the text that subjugates women is not the inevitable interpretation of this text; rather, it reflects the values of those making interpretive decisions. Other readings are not only possible but are also legitimate, logical conclusions to draw from the text. As we shall see, the theme of this passage is not establishing a gendered hierarchy of Adam over Eve. On the contrary, the second chapter of Genesis makes a remarkable case for the

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[48] As Deborah Sawyer puts it, "Despite feminist theologians' attempts to 'depatriarchalise' this narrative, it remains the foundation text for essentialist gender construction in traditional religions. Sawyer, 26.

[49] De La Torre, 53.

[50] Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 50.

importance of mutual companionship—relationships among equals. We read that human beings are not meant to be alone; we are made for one another.

In this passage, the creation of humanity begins with the words of Genesis 2:7, “then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”[51] As is the case in Genesis 1, discussed above, there is grammatical ambiguity regarding the nature of the person that is formed here. The word for this person is the same as in Genesis 1, *hā-ʾādām*. Written with the definite article, the name Adam is not an appropriate translation at this stage of the narrative. But what is the nature of this being that is created? Commonly interpreted as “the man,” this term can be understood as a reference to Adam, from whose rib Eve will then be formed. However, there is another line of interpretation that understands *hā-ʾādām* in a different way.

In her influential book, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Phyllis Trible makes the case for this alternative reading. Her argument is that Adam and Eve, male and female, will enter the picture when the two are divided from this one original person, whom she refers to as the “earth creature.” She explains, “the earth creature here is precisely and only the human being, so far sexually

[51] Genesis 2:7, NRSVue.

undifferentiated."[52] This creature now is without gender, prior to gender. Central to this argument is the word play that is plainly evident in the Hebrew text. The earth creature, *hā-'ādām*, is created from the earth, *hā-'adāmâ*. While this connection can be lost in translation, some translators find ways to retain the connection in English. For instance, Wilda Gafney offers "'the human' created from the *humus* or the 'earthling' created from the *earth*."[53] This is what Trible seeks to retain in her use of "earth creature," making the point that the author's emphasis is on a creature of the earth, created from the dust. For Trible, gender is not part of the picture until Genesis 1:21-23, when woman and man are made from this original earth creature, using two words that are newly introduced to the story, *'îš* and *'iššâ* ("man" and "woman").[54] According to this argument, "Only after surgery does this creature, for the very first time, identify itself as male."[55]

Virginia Mollenkott highlights how this interpretation of *hā-'ādām* as a nongendered being can be a powerful resource of affirmation and liberation for people who are intersex or nonbinary: "From this perspective, intersexuals are

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[52] Trible, 80.
[53] Gafney, 21.
[54] Trible, 98.
[55] Trible, 98.

not only part of God's original plan, they are *primarily* so!"[56] This reading allows people outside the male-female gender binary to see themselves in the text, which is a powerful thing. Furthermore, Justin Sabia-Tanis makes an interesting connection to the way that human babies develop in utero, where a sexually undifferentiated fetus eventually develops male or female anatomy based on the hormones present in the womb. Sabia-Tanis sees a similar phenomenon in the division of the originally androgynous earth creature into male and female, arguing that the passage is "opening up the possibilities of gender."[57] Male and female are not two categorically different entities, unrelated to one another. Instead, they are two possible eventualities that develop from an original unity: the fetus in the womb, or *hā-'ādām* created from *hā-'adāmâ*.

Certainly, then, the understanding of *hā-'ādām* as a nongendered "earth creature" can be a fruitful way to read the story, and it is a reading with a long history, including some early Jewish exegesis.[58] Even so, it is only one possible reading. Some biblical scholars take issue with this interpretation, noting that the text does not clearly indicate that the original person was created without gender. Terence Fretheim, for instance, explains some of the grammatical hurdles

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[56] Mollenkott, 98.
[57] Sabia-Tanis, 61.
[58] De La Torre, 22.

of Trible's proposal and points out that verse 23 uses the word *'îš* ("unambiguously male") to describe the person from whom the woman is made.[59] Such counterarguments do not definitively disprove the "earth creature" reading, but they do make it difficult to say this interpretation is decisive. Whether one is fully convinced or not, however, what is unambiguous is the reason why God creates a second human being: "Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner."[60] As the story proceeds, it is this need for companionship that animates the story.

After God declares that the person should not be alone, God moves into action to create an appropriate partner. Annalisa Azzoni makes the telling observation that when God is seeking a helper for the solitary human being, gender and species seem irrelevant.[61] It is not that a woman is needed to complement the man. In fact, at first God brings forward all kinds of living creatures, with no reference to gender, but none of them is fitting. Therefore, God creates another human being, formed out of the first, and at last an appropriate partner is found. The response is a joyous song of praise: "This at last is bone of

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[59] Fretheim, 353.

[60] Genesis 2:18, NRSVue.

[61] Annalisa Azzoni, "Betraying the Text: Creation Narratives in Their and Our Context," in *Focusing Biblical Studies: The Crucial Nature of the Persian and Hellenistic Periods: Essays in Honor of Douglas A. Knight*, ed. Jon L. Berquist and Alice Hunt (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 87.

my bones and flesh of my flesh."[62] Trible notes the sameness that is emphasized here: "These words speak unity, solidarity, mutuality, and equality."[63] The woman and man belong together because of their similarity, the *'îš* with the *'iššâ*. This is why a fitting helper has now been found, a unity that is emphasized in verse 24's description of becoming "one flesh."[64]

Notably absent from the story is a description of complementary gender roles. The emphasis of the story is that, unlike the animals, only another human being is similar enough to be the helper and companion of the first. The word "helper" must not be misunderstood as implying a hierarchical relationship. This term, *'ezer*, is frequently used in the Bible to refer to God. Noting this, De La Torre asks an important question, "Nowhere in the biblical text where God is referred to as our *'ezer*, our helper, does the term imply subservience. Why then do we assume it does when referred to a woman?"[65] Applications of this text that seek to justify the superiority of men over women, arguing that women are to be men's helpers in a subservient way, are not an accurate representation of the story. God does not create Eve to be the servant of Adam. Rather, the story

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[62] Genesis 2:23.
[63] Trible, 99.
[64] Trible notes the beautiful circularity here: "the creation of humanity found its fulfillment in the creation of sexuality: the earth creature became two, male and female, and those two became one flesh." Trible, 146.
[65] De La Torre, 52.

emphasizes their similarity, making possible their relationship of mutuality. Mollenkott summarizes it well: “The point is not complementarity, but *cohumanity*—a cohumanity, I am convinced, in which every person of every gender is meant to partake.”[66]

Of course, the story does not end here. As Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the forbidden tree and are expelled from the Garden, everything goes awry. God articulates the difficulties that the man and woman will face in their new life outside the garden, including toil over the soil and the challenges of childbirth. Included in this pronouncement is God’s statement to the woman that the man “shall rule over you.”[67] Some readers might argue that this phrase reveals God’s intention for husbands to be in a position of authority over their wives. Yet such a claim ignores the location of this statement in the narrative as a tragic consequence of their disobedience. Brian Bantum states well the meaning of this passage: “Far from reflecting the image of God or the ideal of male-female relationship, this reordering of male/female identity is emblematic of humanity’s fall rather than humanity’s nature as made in the ‘image of God.’”[68] Husbands

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[66] Mollenkott, 102.
[67] Genesis 3:16, NRSVue.
[68] Brian Bantum, "Discipleship and Identity: A Theological Consideration of Race, Gender, and the Human Situation," in *Sex, Gender, and Christianity*, ed. Priscilla Pope-Levison and John R. Levison (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 146.

ruling over wives is not how God intended human relationships to be. The ideal picture is found in the mutuality of the second chapter of Genesis, not in the disordered, fractured world that emerges in chapter three. While this latter image does indeed give a description of "the utilitarian and hierarchical economics of procreative sexuality in the patriarchal social order,"[69] it does so as a contrast to the mutuality and trust that God intended for humanity.

As we have seen, then, Genesis 2-3 does not establish a gender hierarchy for humanity with complementary roles for men and women. These verses are rich and nuanced, open to a range of interpretations, but it is important to note what is not present in the text. Nowhere does it pronounce, "And there shall be two genders, male and female, each with a defined role, and here is what those roles shall be." No, it is a story about two people in a garden, created by God as companions, "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."[70] Their story illuminates the human situation and is rightly seen as a foundational theological depiction of humanity. But it does not set out to limit the possibilities of gender, nor does it claim that male and female are two sides of a coin that are only complete when joined together. Rather, it says that God did not create humans to be alone but to

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[69] Michael Carden, "Genesis/Bereshit," in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Mona West and Robert E. Shore-Goss (London: SCM Press, 2022).
[70] Genesis 2:23, NRSVue.

join with one another. In a hopeful reading of the text, Azzoni asks, "Can this story mean for us today that as we yearn for companionship (sexual or emotional or otherwise), God somewhere in this world has made our match, of any race, sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation? I say yes."[71] These chapter of Genesis do not restrict the possibilities for how humans connect with one another; rather, they illuminate the need that we have for one another, showing that God has created us in this way—regardless of our gender identity and expression.

CONCLUSION

Without question, the ancient world's understanding of gender is not identical to contemporary perspectives and the terminology that has arisen in recent decades.[72] And yet, it would be mistaken for modern readers to dismiss the opening chapters of Genesis as inevitably restrictive or to write them off as relics of another era with little to say to contemporary questions. On the contrary, these poetic texts speak to the depths of human experience in all its mystery and

[71] Azzoni, 87-88.

[72] See Azzoni on the limitations of consulting these texts: "We cannot ask them to teach us about sex and sexuality, as they did not even use such words, so we cannot presume to know what their thoughts were in this regard, and furthermore these texts are not about that." Azzoni, 88.

complexity. Read in their fullness, these texts are imaginative and spacious, creating room for contemporary understandings of gender, even those beyond the understanding of the ancient world. Furthermore, attentive readers engaging this text may find a surprisingly instructive resource that sheds light on even the most contemporary of questions facing the Church today.

In this chapter we have seen that Genesis describes the creation of human beings as "male and female," yet it does so not to constrict reality but to make sense of it. Through grammatical ambiguities and poetic language, Genesis retains a sense of mystery that evades neat answers. Human beings are made male and female in the image of a God who transcends gender, raising the question of what it means for human beings to do the same. Even the seemingly straightforward phrase "male and female" is complicated by the nuanced series of binaries that are presented in the preceding verses on each of the days of creation. Human beings in all their complexity, including their diversity of gender identity and expression, are made by God, created to be in community with one another.

Congregations and individuals have much to learn from these texts. Even when contemporary perspectives on gender and sexuality may seem distant from the traditions that have been handed down, a return to Genesis provides

points of connection between our ever-developing understanding and the foundations of our faith. The Genesis creation accounts gaze with wonder at the immensity of creation and attempt to make sense of it—as do we. With the help of these ancient texts, our understanding of the world continues to grow. Facing the marvelous, bewildering diversity of God's creation, Genesis reminds us that it was God who made it so. And it is good.

Chapter 3: Gender in the Writings of Gregory of Nyssa

In the book *Queer Theology*, Linn Marie Tonstad states, "At the time of writing this book, Gregory of Nyssa is the most influential early Christian writer for queer theologians."[1] Why might this be? How have the writings of this ancient theologian and bishop given inspiration to scholars and practitioners in a context so unlike that of fourth-century Cappadocia? In this chapter, we will examine the concept of gender in Gregory's thought, tracing how his theology and anthropology makes sense of the categories of male and female. We begin by examining how gender is conceptualized in Gregory's understanding of creation in the image of God. Then, after tracing his understanding of gender with regard to reproduction and generation, we turn our attention to eschatology, discovering how Gregory's discussion of the resurrection connects integrally with his view of creation. Finally, we will explore applications of Gregory's thought, both as Gregory saw these ideas playing out in the life of his sister Macrina, and in the ways contemporary scholars draw on Gregory's work in current scholarly debates about gender.

[1] Tonstad, 41.

GENDER, CREATION, AND THE IMAGE OF GOD

The sixteenth chapter of *On the Making of Man* is a key starting point for investigating Gregory of Nyssa's view of human nature, the image of God, and gender. In this chapter, Gregory turns his attention to Genesis 1:26-27, considering what is meant by the idea of humanity created in the image of God. In making sense of this concept, Gregory notes the immense difference between God and humanity: "How then is man, this mortal, passible, shortlived being, the image of that nature which is immortal, pure, and everlasting?"[2] Recognizing the importance of these differences, Gregory seeks to explain how human beings might nevertheless be created in the image of God. His creative solution suggests a division within the act of creation, based upon the repetition in the Hebrew account found in Genesis 1:27. This critical verse reads, "So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."[3] Gregory's distinctive interpretation is to see in this verse a temporal division between two aspects of the creation: first a creation of humanity in the

[2] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, vol. 5, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Select Writings and Letters of Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa.* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), XVI.4. https://ccel.org/ccel/s/schaff/npnf205/cache/npnf205.pdf..

[3] Genesis 1:27, NRSVue. See the previous chapter of this thesis for detailed exegesis of this passage.

image of God, and secondly the creation of human beings that are male and female. He writes, "There is an end of the creation of that which was made 'in the image': then it makes a resumption of the account of creation, and says, 'male and female created He them.'"[4] This two-part creation account is Gregory's solution to the problem of how sinful, flawed, and temporal human beings might be understood as created in the image of a perfect and eternal God: "that which was made 'in the image' is one thing, and that which is now manifested in wretchedness is another."[5] The mortal, imperfect human beings we see embodied in this world are distinguished from that which was initially created in the image of God.

It is important to clarify that the initial creation is not simply the creation of the first man, named Adam. Gregory makes this clarification explicit in a later chapter, when he again discusses Genesis 1:26-27: "Accordingly, the Image of God, which we behold in universal humanity, had its consummation then; but Adam as yet was not; for the thing formed from the earth is called Adam, by etymological nomenclature."[6] This first creation of humanity in the image of God is not simply the forming of Adam in the Garden of Eden. Adam, named after

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[4] Gregory of Nyssa, XVI.7.
[5] Gregory of Nyssa, XVI.7.
[6] Gregory of Nyssa, XXII.3.

the Hebrew word for earth, is part of the physical creation that will come secondarily. In the primary instance, though, something else has been created. What is created in this first creation? Has God merely created the idea of humanity, the Platonic form that will then be embodied? No, Gregory intends more than the creation of a hypothetical abstraction of humanity.

In his study of this passage, Johannes Zachhuber agrees that the initial creation is not the mere "notion" of humanity in an Aristotelian sense.[7] Something more than an idea is created here in the image of God. Zachhuber examines the entirety of the creation story, showing that in Gregory's view, "everything has been created in the very first moment of the world's existence."[8] This can be seen where Gregory writes of an instantaneous act of God's creation when "the substance… of every being concurred in the first act of his will."[9] But what exactly does God create in this first instant of creation? Certainly, the answer is not human bodies or other creatures, which are not yet in physical existence. Zachhuber contends, "what is created fully in the beginning are the principles of corporeal being which, however, are not bodies themselves, but the

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[7] Johannes Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical Background and Theological Significance* (Boston: Brill, 1999), 157.
[8] Zachhuber, 149.
[9] From *Apology on the Hexaëmeron*, cited in Zachhuber, 149.

lowest level of intelligible being."[10] God has created the conditions for future development to come, even if those parts do not yet exist: "Gregory holds universal being to be prior to particular being."[11] In this way, God has created human nature in a universal sense in the image of God, even before physical human beings have been created.

Near the end of the 16th chapter, Gregory addresses this question directly: "the entire plenitude of humanity was included by the God of all, by His power of foreknowledge, as it were in one body, and that this is what the text teaches us which says, 'God created man, in the image of God created He him.'"[12] Warren Smith explains that one reading of this "*plēmōra*, or plenitude," is that it refers to "all human beings who ever will be born."[13] However, one must be careful about implying the creation of individual disembodied souls here. Smith notes, "Nyssen devotes too much time to rejecting Origen's theory of the preexistence of souls apart from bodies to be read as claiming that the soul exists in some prior disembodied state until its birth."[14] Understanding Gregory properly requires walking a fine line here. This first instance of creation is more than

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[10] Zachhuber, 151.
[11] Zachhuber, 154.
[12] Gregory of Nyssa, XVI.17.
[13] J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 2004), 32.
[14] Smith, 32.

simply the idea of humanity, yet it is also not the pre-creation of all the souls for all of the individuals of humanity. As Smith explains, "for Nyssen, the *plēmōra* includes both universal characteristics of human beings and the particular individuals who will share in that nature."[15]

Clearly, then, Gregory has created a challenging conceptual problem in his two-fold division of the creation account in Genesis. Scholars continue to debate precisely what he envisions in each part of that creation. Such a question is not merely a curiosity, however, for it has wide-ranging implications for Gregory's anthropology and theology more widely. What exactly is the character of human nature as described in the first part of the creation story, and in what sense is this a reflection of the image of God? Gregory's anthropology places human beings in a unique position between God and the rest of the created world. In a passage worth citing at length, Gregory draws a contrast between the divine nature and the nature of animals, illuminating human nature in the process:

> I think that by these words Holy Scripture conveys to us a great and lofty doctrine; and the doctrine is this. While two natures—the Divine and incorporeal nature, and the irrational life of brutes—are separated from each other as extremes, human nature is the mean between them: for in the compound nature of man we may behold a part of each of the natures I have mentioned,—of the Divine, the rational and intelligent element,

[15] Smith, 35.

> which does not admit the distinction of male and female; of the irrational, our bodily form and structure, divided into male and female: for each of these elements is certainly to be found in all that partakes of human life. That the intellectual element, however, precedes the other, we learn as from one who gives in order an account of the making of man; and we learn also that his community and kindred with the irrational is for man a provision for reproduction.[16]

In this section, Gregory clearly distinguishes the divine nature from the nature of animals. The divine is marked by rationality and intelligence, while the animal is marked by non-rationality and bodily forms. As for human beings, Gregory describes their position as the "mean between them," describing human nature as compound. Humans are a mixture of the divine and the irrational/animalistic. This division corresponds to the twofold creation that Gregory has described: the divine nature is created in the image of God; secondarily, the human being is created male and female, taking on the bodily form associated with its animal nature. Zachhuber says it well: "human nature's special property is that it is a mixture of two kinds of being, that is, sensible and intelligible substance."[17]

For our purposes, it is particularly significant that Gregory places gender distinctions in the latter category. In his reading, Scripture "says first that 'God created man in the image of God, (showing by these words, as the Apostle says,

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[16] Gregory of Nyssa, XVI.9.
[17] Zachhuber, 145-46.

that in such a being there is no male or female): then he adds the peculiar attributes of human nature, 'male and female created He them.'"[18] The division of male and female is not part of the nature of God; it is part of the irrational, animal nature that is added later. As Smith puts it, "The anthropological significance of the creation of gender in time, and not as part of God's intention in Genesis 1:26, is that it removes gender from the essence of human nature and stresses its ad hoc nature."[19] Male and female are but a temporary concession. To further buttress his perspective, Gregory quotes Galatians 3:28 to suggest that a gendered humanity "is a departure from the Prototype: for 'in Christ Jesus,' as the apostle says, 'there is neither male nor female.'"[20] Why, then, is gender created at all? Let us turn now to this question.

GENDER AND GENERATION

As seen above, when God created humanity in the divine image, God was not simply creating the idea of humanity, but the entire plenitude (*plēmōra*) of humans who would come into existence. Furthermore, Gregory believed that this creation was not abstractly open-ended; rather, God created the specific number

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[18] Gregory of Nyssa, XVI.9.
[19] Smith, 41.
[20] Gregory of Nyssa, XVI.7.

of human beings who would come into existence. The method by which these human beings would be born, however, is complicated. After all, the initial creation of humanity does not include gender and reproductive ability. These are added in the second move of creation: "male and female he created them."[21] Gender is created as a provisional device to allow for human reproduction, until that point when "the full number of men pre-conceived by the operation of foreknowledge will come into life by means of this animal generation."[22] That humans are given an animal means of reproduction is no accident; in fact, Gregory believes that the reason for this reproductive mode is because of sin.

Gregory contends that when God created humanity, God knew that humanity would be drawn toward evil. God's foreknowledge of the fall, then, led God to create for humanity a means of reproduction that would be fitting to that fallen, irrational nature: "as He perceived in our created nature the bias towards evil, and the fact that after its voluntary fall from equality with the angels it would acquire a fellowship with the lower nature, He mingled, for this reason, with His own image, an element of the irrational (for the distinction of male and female does not exist in the Divine and blessed nature)."[23] Gender

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[21] Genesis 1:27c, NRSVue.
[22] Gregory of Nyssa, XXII.5.
[23] Gregory of Nyssa, XXII.4.

distinctions and sexual reproduction belong to the irrational nature that is like that of animals, rather than the divine nature.

As evidence, Gregory notes that in the Genesis narrative, the command to be fruitful and multiply comes not when humanity is first made in the image of God, but rather when the sexual distinctions are created. Indeed, Gregory contends that were it not for our sinfulness, this mode of reproduction would not be needed at all. However, with foreknowledge of the fall, God "formed for our nature that contrivance for increase which befits those who had fallen into sin, implanting in mankind, instead of the angelic majesty of nature, that animal and irrational mode by which they now succeed one another."[24] One hears the disdain in Gregory's description of human reproduction. Rather than a divine mode of generation, humanity "was made like the beasts."[25]

Interestingly, at this point in the text Gregory does not go into further detail about what the alternative mode of divine generation entails. He references humanity's "fall from that mode by which the angels were increased and multiplied,"[26] but he does not explain what angelic forms of reproduction might be. Verna Harrison's study of generation in Gregory's thought sheds light

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[24] Gregory of Nyssa, XVII.4.
[25] Gregory of Nyssa, XVII.5.
[26] Gregory of Nyssa, XVII.4.

on this question. To understand this line of thinking, however, we must first look deeper into Gregory of Nyssa's understanding of generation within the Trinity as an instance of divine generation: how does the Father beget the Son?

While a full account of Gregory's Trinitarian theology is beyond the scope of this project, a brief examination of this limited aspect will be helpful. Harrison directs our attention to another of Gregory's works, *On Virginity*. In this text, Gregory speaks about the generation of the Son, locating virginity in the nature of the Father: "here at the outset is a paradox, viz. that virginity is found in Him, Who has a Son and yet without passion has begotten Him."[27] For Gregory, the "passionlessness" and incorruptibility of such virginal generation mark this mode of generation as the divine ideal. Harrison describes this well:

> "In its most perfect form, generation is a being's coming from another being of the same nature, while remaining consubstantial with it and existing along with it. … Created modes of generation fall short of the ideal in varying degrees to the extent that they involve limitations of time, place, matter, division, passion, and corruption. Ordinary human generation and that of the animals, the only two that involve gender and sexuality, are especially far from the ideal, and Gregory often contrasts them with the other, higher forms."[28]

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[27] Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, ch. 2.
[28] Verna E.F. Harrison, "Gender, Generation, and Virginity in Cappadocian Theology," *Journal of Theological Studies* 47, no. 1 (April 1996): 67, https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/jts/47.1.38.

As we seek to understand human sexual reproduction as a secondary concession for humanity's fallen nature, this comparison with the Father's generation of the Son makes a helpful point of contrast. Human gender and sexuality are part of the animal nature that is absent from the divine nature.

Gregory's contention is not that the reproduction of created beings must involve sexuality. No, the problem is human sinfulness. Gregory argues that a more divine mode of generation is a legitimate possibility for those outside the Godhead by describing the generation of angelic beings. For this, Gregory returns to Scripture. In the twentieth chapter of Luke's Gospel, the Sadducees confront Jesus with a tricky question about the marriage in the resurrection. The answer Jesus gives makes a contrast between this age and the age to come. Although people now are married, in the resurrection people "neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection."[29] This passage raises many questions, to be sure, providing fodder for theologians and Biblical scholars to explore. For Gregory's purposes, the key point is the reference to being "like angels." In the picture that Jesus paints, human beings return to an ideal state when they no longer die, nor do they have need for

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[29] Luke 20:35b, NRSVue.

marriage. As Gregory sees it, this gives us a glimpse not only into the future but also into the past, for "the resurrection promises us nothing else than the restoration of the fallen to their ancient state."[30] By looking at this reference to angelic life, then, we are able to draw conclusions about humanity as created before the fall—and before the addition of male and female.

Gregory makes explicit this connection between future and past, surmising that "life before the transgression was a kind of angelic life."[31] As he seeks to draw out what can be learned from this, he concludes that inferences can be made about angelic generation, even though Jesus' words are not explicit on the matter. Specifically, Gregory notes that elsewhere in Scripture, including in Daniel's visions, we find reference to whole hosts of angels, despite having just heard that there is no marriage in angelic life. Gregory dares not speculate about how angels are able to reproduce, but, evidently, they are able to do so somehow. His point is that if it were not for human sinfulness, humans would not have needed sexual reproduction, either: "whatever the mode of increase in the angelic nature is (unspeakable and inconceivable by human conjectures, except that it assuredly exists), it would have operated also in the case of men,

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[30] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, XVII.2.
[31] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, XVII.2.

who were 'made a little lower than the angels,' to increase mankind to the measure determined by its Maker."[32] The asexual, angelic mode of procreation would have been used by humanity if there were no human sinfulness. However, due to God's foreknowledge of the fall, human beings are given the "present mode of transient generation"[33] rather than sharing in the divine mode of generation that is characteristic of the angels and of God.

GENDER IN GREGORY'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE RESURRECTION

As the consideration of angelic generation demonstrates, Gregory makes a connection between humanity as initially intended and the humanity that is encountered eschatologically: "the man that was manifested at the first creation of the world, and he that shall be after the consummation of all, are alike: they equally bear in themselves the Divine image"[34] Thus far our examination of Gregory has focused primarily on the beginning, exploring how Gregory conceives of the creation in its twofold form. We now turn our attention to Gregory's understanding of the end, considering what can be learned here about human nature in the image of God, particularly as it relates to gender.

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[32] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, XVII.2., quoting Psalm 8:5.
[33] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, XVII.5.
[34] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, XVI.17.

While Gregory is hesitant to speculate far beyond what humans can know, he nonetheless thinks it important to discuss. Warren Smith cautions that it may not be possible to pin down Gregory's eschatology precisely, for he is not entirely consistent: "Nyssen's eschatology in general and specifically his treatment of the resurrection cannot be spoken of in the singular; he has not one eschatology, but many eschatologies. Nor does he feel any compulsion to reconcile them; for they are but speculations and insights of a reality seen as through a glass dimly."[35] Despite the difficulty of Gregory's lack of precision and consistency, it is nonetheless fruitful to explore his understanding of eschatology and the resurrection. We are helped in this by noticing the connections between his view of resurrection and the account of creation examined above.

In his account of creation, Gregory notes that gender and reproductive faculties have been added so that humanity can multiply and increase in number to the amount God has ordained. Our focus now is on what happens when that number has been reached: "when the generation of men is completed, time should cease together with its completion, and then should take place the restitution of all things, and with the World-Reformation humanity also should

[35] Smith, 216.

be changed from the corruptible and earthly to the impassible and eternal."[36] Central to Gregory's view here is the concept of restitution. Gregory envisions a return to the past, specifically to the perfect form of humanity in God's image, as created in the first stage of creation. In this way, the resurrection is understood as "*the reconstitution of our nature in its original form*."[37]

As Gregory develops his account of the eschaton, he draws heavily on Paul's account of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, which distinguishes the physical body and the spiritual body of the resurrection, one that is of dust and one that is of heaven. Thus, the resurrection involves more than the miraculous resuscitation of earthly bodies that had died. Gregory follows Paul in describing both an earthly body and a heavenly body, which are different from one another. As Paul writes, "we shall be changed."[38] Drawing on this Pauline imagery, Gregory describes the transformation that takes place in the eschaton, "when the trumpet of the resurrection sounds, which awakens the dead, and transforms those who are left in life, after the likeness of those who have undergone the resurrection change, at once to incorruptibility."[39] Noteworthy is that the

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[36] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, XXII.5.
[37] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection*.
[38] 1 Corinthians 15:52.
[39] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, XXII.6.

resurrection is not merely a restoration of life for those who had died; even those still living experience a transformation of their bodies, restored now to their original form.

Gregory explores this phenomenon more deeply in *On the Soul and Resurrection*. This work is crafted as a deathbed dialogue between Gregory and his beloved sister Macrina. Referred to as the Teacher, she explains various theological concepts in answer to the questions that the character of Gregory raises in the account. One section that is of particular interest to this study explores the nature of the body in the resurrection. The question is this: since Gregory's understanding of the twofold creation involves the addition of the elements of male and female, an accommodation to our earthly reproductive needs, then will these characteristics of the body be present in the resurrection? What sort of spiritual body is left when the earthly parts are no longer needed or appropriate?

In his questioning of Macrina, Gregory begins this line of inquiry by noting how different life in the afterlife will be. Without a need for eating and drinking for nourishment, there will be no need for the parts of the body involved in digestion and excretion. He also references sexual reproduction, noting, "If, for the sake of marriage, there are now certain organs adapted for

marriage, then, whenever the latter ceases to be, we shall not need those organs."[40] We have seen in his consideration of Luke 20 that Gregory cites Jesus's teaching that there is no marriage in the resurrection, and here he argues that the body parts meant for marriage will therefore no longer be necessary. As Gregory develops this argument, it becomes clear that virtually the entire body as presently constituted is designed for functional purposes in this earthly life. Its organs will not be needed in the resurrection. This becomes problematic, however, if we then say that such organs will not be part of the spiritual body: "if the things that are not going to contribute in any way to that other life are not to surround the body, none of the parts which at present constitute the body would exist either."[41] How could it be a bodily resurrection if none of the same body parts are present? On the other hand, Gregory considers it absurd for a body to be composed of parts which have no function. This tension is the paradox that his character poses to Macrina to address.

Macrina's answer to Gregory is not entirely satisfying. In fact, she concedes at the start that she is unable to provide a convincing answer to the line of argument he raises. However, she insists that this whole line of questioning

[40] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection*.
[41] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection*.

misses the point: "the truth does not lie in these arguments."[42] While this may seem to the reader to be a rather convenient evasion, this is nevertheless how Gregory, through the voice of Macrina, approaches the topic, appealing to mystery and pointing to God's power. She states, "The true explanation of all these questions is still stored up in the hidden treasure-rooms of Wisdom, and will not come to the light until that moment when we shall be taught the mystery of the Resurrection by the reality of it."[43] As she proceeds, she drifts further from the question that had been posed, yet this is clearly intended to be pointing us in what Gregory views as a more important direction.

Rather than speculating about the future, Macrina directs our focus back to the original form of our human nature. After all, Gregory understands the resurrection as restoration, a return to how we were created in the image of God. As such, the present features of our earthly body, including being formed as male and female, can now be laid aside. We can remove the "coats of skins," including "sexual intercourse, conception, parturition, impurities, suckling, feeding, evacuation, gradual growth to full size, prime of life, old age, disease, and death."[44] Such things have no part in the resurrection. Indeed, the bodily

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[42] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection*.
[43] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection*.
[44] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection*.

differences and infirmities that characterize the earthly life are insignificant to the resurrection life.

And yet, Gregory's thought is still insistent on a bodily resurrection. Answering the question of how decomposed bodies might be resurrected, Gregory details how the soul will draw in "kindred dust"[45] from throughout the world: "in the bodies that rise again there will be a return from the common stock to the individual."[46] Somehow the soul will recognize the elements that should be drawn back together as the body is reconstituted. Modern readers might raise objections, noting that the body is constantly in flux. There is never one stable constellation of atoms that comprise a particular person, and in fact the same elements may leave one person's body and become part of another's. Yet Gregory anticipates this objection. His answer is simply that such an argument is folly, considering how many greater miracles God has performed. How does the miraculous re-creation of a body compare to the creation of a star, or the creation of "the firmament, the air, water, the earth?"[47] If God can do those things, God can create a resurrected body. After all, it was God who created the human body in the first place. At some point Gregory must resign himself to

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[45] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection*.
[46] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, XXVII.3.
[47] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection*.

mystery, asserting that God will bring about a resurrection of the body somehow, even if human knowledge cannot comprehend how.

Will this be the same body as before? In a sense, it must be the same body, in order to be considered a resurrected body and not merely a new body. Nevertheless, Gregory has insisted that in the eschaton we shall all be changed. In fact, the body is always changing. One passage in *On the Making of Man* is particularly helpful in understanding constancy amidst that change:

> for the body is on the one hand altered by way of growth and diminution, changing, like garments, the vesture of its successive statures, while the form, on the other hand, remains in itself unaltered through every change, not varying from the marks once imposed upon it by nature, but appearing with its own tokens of identity in all the changes which the body undergoes.[48]

During a person's life, despite the changes occurring in the body, the essential form is maintained. From an eschatological perspective, Gregory returns to his definition, "Resurrection is no other thing than '*the re-constitution of our nature in its original form.*'"[49] What is most essential about human nature is maintained throughout life, even with the addition of an earthly form. In the resurrection, that original, essential nature, created in the image of God, is revealed: "our

[48] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, XXVII.3.
[49] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection*.

humanity will be then changed into something nobler, but also that what we have therein to expect is nothing else than that which was at the beginning."[50]

Does the resurrection body have gender? On the one hand, it should not, as Gregory clearly has presented gender as a secondary device that is added for the sake of reproduction, owing to humanity's fallen nature. On the other hand, Gregory maintains an eschatological understanding of the resurrection of the material body, not simply an abstracted soul. Just as Christ was resurrected to the same body in which he had walked on earth, so too does humanity share in that resurrection in their own bodies.[51] Can it be that these bodies remain the same, yet in some meaningful way they are not understood any longer as gendered? If so, this deemphasizing of physical attributes associated with gender will clearly have implications for modern readers seeking to understand gender beyond the physical characteristics of the body.

The critical tension between physical forms and gender attributes is not decisively resolved in Gregory's eschatology. However, Gregory provides a promising way forward through his conceptualization of transcendence. In his scholarly discussion of passion and desire in Gregory's thought, Warren Smith

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[50] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection*.
[51] See Smith, 200.

explains how the emotions are transformed eschatologically, such that “our human nature can retain its physical nature in the resurrection and yet overcome the irrational emotions alien to the divine nature.”[52] A similar argument can be made for the physical characteristics associated with gender. The body’s material form may be retained in the resurrection, yet gender itself is transcended. Fortunately, while this concept of transcending gender may seem highly abstract, Gregory provides a concrete application in his discussion of the life and death of his sister.

MACRINA’S TRANSCENDENCE OF GENDER

Gregory’s biographical account of his sister, called *Life of Macrina*, provides a revealing glimpse into the application of Gregory’s ideas, particularly as they relate to gender. At the outset, Gregory makes a fascinating remark about his sister, who is the subject of the work: “In this case it was a woman who provided us with our subject; if indeed she should be styled ‘woman' for I do not know whether it is fitting to designate her by her sex, who so surpassed her sex.”[53] What does it mean that Macrina has “surpassed” her sex, such that she

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[52] Smith, 200.

[53] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, trans. W.K. Lowther Clarke, *Internet Medieval Sourcebook* (London: SPCK, 1916). https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/macrina.asp.

might not even be called a woman any longer? This peculiar statement demands further attention.

It is important to note that Gregory is not describing a process of masculinization that Macrina undergoes as a result of her virtue. Warren Smith notes that other philosophers and theologians in the ancient world, such as Jerome, held the view that virgins could abandon their femininity, thus metaphorically becoming male.[54] A similar view can also be seen in the enigmatic final verse of the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas: "Simon Peter said to him, 'Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.' Jesus said, 'I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.'"[55]

Such an account of transcending femininity by assuming masculinity is not what Gregory intends. Instead, Gregory is arguing that Macrina has transcended the categories of gender entirely. This view relies upon his views about the creation of gender as an accommodation to the needs of our fallen

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[54] Smith, 45.
[55] *Gospel of Thomas*, trans. Thomas O. Labdin, *The Nag Hammadi Library, Revised Edition* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), verse 14. https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/thomas-lambdin.html.

human nature, as seen in *On the Making of Man* and examined above. Gender is a secondary addition in the creation, built atop the human nature that is created in the image of God. Macrina's remarkable life shows the possibility of transcending that second creation, moving beyond the limitations associated with a physical, gendered mode of existence.[56] Gregory describes her as leading an "angelic and heavenly life," longing to be "loosed from the chains of the body."[57] Notice the way he describes Macrina's virtue, even on her deathbed, as a person who has transcended her physical form:

> For that she did not even in her last breath find anything strange in the hope of the Resurrection, nor even shrink at the departure from this life, but with lofty mind continued to discuss up to her last breath the convictions she had formed from the beginning about this life—all this seemed to me more than human. Rather did it seem as if some angel had taken human form with a sort of incarnation, to whom it was nothing strange that the mind should remain undisturbed, since he had no kinship or likeness with this life of flesh, and so the flesh did not draw the mind to think on its afflictions.[58]

Gregory's perception of his sister is that her calm faith and rationality in the face of death seem to him "more than human." His earlier claim that she is no longer a woman does not mean that she has become like a man; rather, she has

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[56] See Smith, 46: "Macrina through her ascetic discipline and her devotion to a life of virginity so suppresses the passions of her nonrational nature—that nature associated with the second creation—that he speaks of her as transcending her gender, in a real sense no longer being a woman."

[57] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*.

[58] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*.

transcended gender altogether and become like the angelic beings that are beyond gender.

In this way, Macrina's exemplary life serves as a window into the future, providing a glimpse of Gregory's eschatological vision of the resurrection, in which earthly categories of gender are transcended. Moreover, Macrina demonstrates the ways in which such transcendence is accessible in this life. Or, as Smith puts it, "The Christian life is a proleptic participation in the life to come."[59] The resurrection is a return to the original nature of humanity in the image of God, which is beyond and prior to gender. Christianity invites us to participate in that life, even now.

CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS OF GREGORY'S THOUGHT

The theology of Gregory of Nyssa presents an intriguing opportunity for contemporary theologians who are interested in gender. Particularly as our modern context has begun listening to the voices of those who are nonbinary, transgender, or otherwise outside the traditional gender norms, Gregory of Nyssa provides an opportunity to question what precisely is meant by

[59] Smith, 3.

“traditional.” In Gregory we find a fourth-century bishop whose remarkable views on gender are surprisingly counter to the perception that gender is binary, stable, and an essential element of one’s identity. Here, the destabilization of gender comes not as a radical modern critique but in the form an early church leader who seeks to understand humanity as made in the image of a genderless God—for, Gregory says matter-of-factly, “the distinction of male and female does not exist in the Divine and blessed nature.”[60]

To be sure, Gregory’s views on gender are not equivalent to those typically held by modern scholars. His writings often reflect the cultural values of the time in which he lived. For instance, in his *Life of Macrina*, in addition to the statement about how Macrina transcended gender, we also find reflections of the gender views of his day. Gregory describes an example of how Macrina’s calming influence prevented their grieving mother from being overly emotional, saying that she did not “behave in any ignoble and womanish way, so as to cry out at the calamity, or tear her dress,”[61] clearly associating femininity with emotionality, which was supposedly inferior to the higher, rational nature. In matters of social convention, as well, we find evidence of gender distinctions at

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[60] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, XXII.4.
[61] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*.

play, such as when Gregory seats men and women separately at Macrina's funeral, something Gregory mentions in passing as a normal practice that he does not question.[62] Gregory was a product of his time.

All the more remarkable, then, are the ways in which Gregory's thought does upend binary views of stable gender roles. Verna Harrison notes Gregory's persistent willingness to use both male and female imagery to describe God; in fact, his work "contains texts that speak of each member of the Trinity in feminine language."[63] See, for instance, this passage from Gregory's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*:

> Now no one who has given thought to the way we talk about God is going to be overprecise about the sense of the name— that "mother" is mentioned instead of "father," for he will gather the same meaning from either term. For the Divine is neither male nor female. (How, after all, could any such thing be conceived in the case of Deity, when this condition is not permanent even for us human beings, but when we all become one in Christ, we put off the signs of this difference along with the whole of the old humanity?) For this reason, every name we turn up is of the same adequacy for purposes of pointing to the unutterable Nature, since neither "male" nor "female" defiles the meaning of the inviolate Nature.[64]

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[62] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*.
[63] Harrison, 40.
[64] Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans. Jr. Richard A. Norris (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 225. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Today, the use of male and female terminology and metaphors for God remains controversial even in relatively progressive congregations.[65] Yet Gregory has no qualms about doing so, proceeding to make a parenthetical mark in passing about the insignificance of gender in human identity as well, at least in an eschatological sense. Nevertheless, Gregory does continue to use the language of "Father" and "Son" when describing the Trinity, even while welcoming feminine metaphors alongside male ones for describing the relationship between humanity and God.

In light of this, Gregory presents a rich resource for scholars to engage. Verna Harrison explores Gregory's discussion of human generation, noting his tendency to spiritualize these capacities in an eschatological context. Harrison further develops the concept of spiritual motherhood, citing a passage from Gregory's *On Those Who Have Fallen Asleep* in which Gregory connects the human power to give birth with becoming spiritually pregnant and participating in a kind of "spiritual generation."[66] Harrison shows how this sort of spirituality, for men and for women, represents a kind of motherhood, thus marking a reversal

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[65] Consider, for instance, introducing the Lord's Prayer with the words, "Our Mother," a choice that would be viewed as surprising, if not scandalous, in many contexts.
[66] Harrison, 62.

in gender roles for men.[67] This continuation and application of Gregory's project reveals the boundary-crossing aspects of transcending gender in the way Gregory has proposed.

Similarly, Michael Nausner examines the implications of Gregory's eschatology for understanding how masculinity and femininity are destabilized. Intentionally utilizing a more contemporary and provocative term, Nausner argues that "a playful and mutual transgendering, rather than transcendence of gender, is at work in this eschatology."[68] The idea is that Gregory depicts both God and humanity acting in ways that are typically understood as both male and female.[69] The oscillation between those roles presents "a dynamic process of transgendering."[70] The implication here is that gender is not a binary, fixed state. Nausner concludes that "our gendered identities after all are not *created* norms but malleable roles to be continuously and playfully enacted again and again."[71]

This final statement on the enacted nature of gender brings us to broader questions about how gender is best understood. Is gender an inherent, essential

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[67] Harrison, 67-68.
[68] Michael Nausner, "Toward Community Beyond Gender Binaries: Gregory of Nyssa's Transgendering as Part of His Transformative Eschatology," *Theology & Sexuality* 2002, no. 16 (2001): 56, https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/135583580200801606
[69] Nausner, 65.
[70] Nausner, 65.
[71] Nausner, 65.

part of one's identity, or is it something that is socially created and performed? Sarah Coakley explores these questions in her writings, considering Gregory of Nyssa alongside the influential work of Judith Butler.[72] In their unique ways, both Gregory and Butler suggest that gender is not a fixed, essential component of human identity. Butler's view "assumes both a fluidity of gender and its (re)creation through repeated practice."[73] As we have seen, Gregory sees gender as a temporary accommodation for the sake of earthly reproduction, a feature that can be transcended through virtuous religious practice, as demonstrated by Macrina. Coakley further connects their two perspectives, noting that "like Gregory of Nyssa… Butler sees the point of 'practices' of transformation that start now but have their final goal in the future: they create the future by enacting its possibilities."[74] This approach creatively connects Butler's scholarship with Gregory's notion of participating now in the life of God that is to be fully experienced eschatologically.

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[72] For more on the ideas and influence of Judith Butler, see Chapter 1 of this thesis.
[73] Sarah Coakley, "The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God," *Modern Theology* 16, no. 1 (2000): 65, https://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1468-0025.00115
[74] Coakley, 64.

CONCLUSION

As contemporary scholars and practitioners seek to understand the meaning and significance of gender in our time, Gregory of Nyssa provides a critical ancient voice that speaks into the ongoing conversation. The answers Gregory gives are not always consistent or final, yet they are fascinating and rich, stimulating debate and insight. Gregory describes a God who transcends gender, and human beings—created in God's image—who are invited to transcend gender as well. How precisely this works may be beyond our knowledge, but Gregory is not deterred by mystery. Despite the limitations inherent to human knowledge, Gregory of Nyssa takes us as far as he can: "The true answer to this question, indeed, perhaps only the very Truth knows: but this is what we, tracing out the truth so far as we are capable by conjectures and inferences, apprehend concerning the matter."[75]

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[75] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, XVI: 4.

Chapter 4: Eunuchs in the Bible

One challenge for congregations as they respond to a shifting landscape of gender is that the issues facing contemporary congregations are not clearly depicted in the Bible, a source that many consult for guidance and insight. Words like "transgender," "nonbinary," and "queer" do not appear in the biblical text. And yet, lessons can be drawn from what is found in the Bible. While Scripture may not mirror modern understandings of gender exactly, helpful lessons can be drawn from the Bible's treatment of a unique group of people: eunuchs. As one transgender author explains, "Eunuchs are the closest biblical analogy we have to transgendered people."[1] In this chapter, we will consider four main biblical texts that describe eunuchs. Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Matthew, and Acts each describe the situation of eunuchs in different ways. We will consider each passage separately before considering how we place these passages in conversation with one another—and in conversation with the contemporary questions churches are facing. Before we turn to Deuteronomy, however, we begin with some general observations about eunuchs in Scripture and how they provide a helpful point of reference for modern readers.

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[1] Sabia-Tanis, 69.

Although Eunuchs are generally unfamiliar to the experience of modern readers, they were an ordinary part of the ancient world. The Hebrew word for eunuchs, סָרִיס, occurs several dozen times in the Old Testament. Both this word and its Greek counterpart, εὐνοῦχος, "can refer to a castrated man, a public official or both, since court attendants in antiquity were often eunuchs in the physical sense."[2] For example, the book of Esther refers repeatedly to the eunuchs who attend to the king, convey his commands, and watch after the queen and concubines, moving freely between male and female spaces.[3] Eunuchs were often entrusted with these roles because they were not seen as a threat to the king. As one commentator explains, "eunuchs were valued not just for putative celibacy but because they would not conspire to place their children upon the throne."[4] Unable to have children of their own, they would not be able to start a rival dynasty or claim paternity of any of the purported children of the king.

Despite their accepted presence in ancient society, however, they were not always well-regarded or treated well by others. Scott Spencer outlines the scorn

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[2] F. Scott Spencer, *The Portrait of Philip in Acts: A Study of Roles and Relations*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series*, vol. 67 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 166.
[3] See Esther 1:10-12, 2:3, and 2:14, among others.
[4] Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, *Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 224.

and stigma that eunuchs faced in antiquity, spotlighting the writings of Josephus and Philo that show the negative light in which eunuchs were viewed within the Jewish community of this era. Josephus writes that people should shun and expel eunuchs, referring to them as a "monstrosity," while Philo decries "the men who belie their sex and are affected with effemination, who debase the currency of nature and violate it by assuming the passions and the outward form of licentious women."[5] Their marginal social status is part of what makes eunuchs a compelling analogue for contemporary transgender people, many of whom face a similar suspicion and exclusion in society, particularly in religious contexts.

Eunuchs were frequently viewed as boundary-breakers whose very nature could be seen as threatening to the well-ordered distinction between male and female. As Peter Brown explains, "The eunuch was notorious (and repulsive to many) because he had dared to shift the massive boundary between the sexes. He had opted out of being male. … He was a human being 'exiled from either gender.'"[6] Furthermore, the physical development of some eunuchs led them to possess characteristics that were somewhere between those typical of men and women, as Sean Burke explains: "Eunuchs castrated before puberty were

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[5] In Spencer, 169.

[6] Peter Robert Lamont Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 169.

variously gendered in ancient discourses as 'effeminate males,' 'half-males,' 'girls,' hybrids of male and female, and neither male nor female."[7] It would be anachronistic and inaccurate to describe eunuchs as inhabiting a space of nonbinary gender identity or to identify them as transgender, yet the analogy between modern, gender-expansive people and the eunuchs of the Bible can be an instructive one. By considering how eunuchs are described in Scripture, we can draw insights that are relevant to contemporary considerations of gender.

DEUTERONOMY: CLEAR, RESTRICTIVE BOUNDARIES

We begin by turning to Deuteronomy 23:1, a verse that does not use the word "eunuch" but stipulates their exclusion from Israelite worship nonetheless. The verse reads, "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall come into the assembly of the LORD."[8] The prohibition here is blunt and complete. There are several ways to understand the impetus behind such a restriction, which does not list an explicit rationale. One possibility relates to the ancient belief "that sexual potency was a mark of divine blessing and

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[7] Sean D. Burke, "Queering Early Christian Discourse: The Ethiopian Eunuch," in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Teresa J. Hornsby and Ken Stone (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 181.
[8] Deuteronomy 23:1, NRSVue.

wholeness,"[9] a potency that is absent from those listed in this verse. Victors in battle sometimes inflicted the punishments described here on the enemy soldiers they defeated, both to prevent their reproduction and to humiliate them. Deuteronomy 23:1 can be read as an endorsement of the view that such people lack connection to the blessing of God, reflecting "how closely covenantal membership is related to sexual generativity, a pervasive concern of the ancestral narratives in Genesis."[10] If such people lack the blessing of God and the ability to reproduce, then, they are to be excluded.

Reading this verse alongside the verses that follow, it becomes clear that such a restriction is part of a larger emphasis on the lines between insiders and outsiders.[11] The entire opening section of Deuteronomy 23 is concerned with the boundaries of who is allowed into the assembly of the LORD and who is forbidden. The second verse forbids "those born of an illicit union"[12] from entering the assembly, and the next six verses detail the inclusion and exclusion of four specific ethnic groups, the Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites, and

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[9] Ronald E. Clements, "The Book of Deuteronomy," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 460-61.
[10] Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001). https://www-ministrymatters-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/reader/9781426750519/.
[11] Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*.
[12] Deuteronomy 23:2, NRSVue.

Egyptians. Such an emphasis reflects the needs and concerns of the community during the tumultuous time in which these regulations were recorded. As Ronald Clements explains, "A strong sense that the people of Israel were threatened with breakup and dissolution and that the ready-made givenness of clan and tribal affiliations no longer played a decisive role pervades Deuteronomy."[13] In a time of anxiety about maintaining the cohesion and distinctive identity of Israel, firm boundaries provided stability and reassurance. While this does not fully explain the prohibition listed in 23:1, the context does shed light on the sharp lines that are being drawn.

A helpful parallel to this restriction can be found in Leviticus 21 in the regulations for priests. In fact, according to Blenkinsopp, the prohibition in Deuteronomy 23:1 "appears to be an extension to the people as a whole of the Levitical rules governing the priesthood."[14] In Leviticus, however, the regulation is placed in a broader context that reveals its underlying meaning:

> **16** The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, **17** "Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. **18** Indeed, no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who is mutilated or deformed, **19** or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, **20** or a

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[13] Clements, 460.

[14] Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56–66 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 1 ed., vol. 19B, *The Anchor Yale Bible* (New Haven & London: Doubleday, 2003), 138.

> hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a defect in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles.[15]

Clearly, in this case a person with crushed testicles is forbidden because this is viewed as a blemish, not because of a deeper issue with the nature of eunuchs themselves. Leviticus 21:23 makes the explanation plain: "But he shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries, for I am the Lord; I sanctify them."[16] Just as priests are to present unblemished animals as a sacrifice, they too must be without blemish.

At stake is the possibility of profaning the sanctuary, a matter of ritual impurity defiling the holiness of the priests' sacred responsibilities. Crucially, ritual impurity does not imply any sort of moral failing. Consider, for instance, the case of those who come in contact with the body of a person who has died. Such contact, while entirely appropriate for those caring for a deceased person's corpse, nevertheless leaves the person ritually unclean.[17] The opening of Leviticus 21, in fact—the same chapter as the verses about blemishes—discusses the circumstances of priests caring for the bodies of close relatives and thereby defiling themselves for a period of time. This context clarifies that when verse 20

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[15] Leviticus 21:16-20, NRSVue.

[16] Leviticus 21:23, NRSVue.

[17] Numbers 19 explains this in detail.

lists "crushed testicles" as a disqualifying feature, at issue is not a moral judgment about eunuchs categorically, but rather a concern for the ritual purity of the priests attending to their work. As verse 6 explains, "They shall be holy to their God, and not profane the name of their God; for they offer the LORD's offerings by fire, the food of their God; therefore they shall be holy."[18] When Deuteronomy 23:1 extends this prohibition beyond the priesthood to the entire assembly of the LORD, it is possible that a similar concern with purity and holiness is at play. Regardless of the rationale behind it, however, the fact remains the blanket prohibition in Deuteronomy 23:1 presents a sharp barrier for eunuchs, who are forbidden to enter "the assembly of the LORD."

Before leaving the book of Deuteronomy, one additional verse deserves our attention. While not specifically about eunuchs, it is frequently referenced in contemporary discussions of gender issues. Deuteronomy 22:5 reads, "A woman shall not wear a man's apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment, for whoever does such things is abhorrent to the LORD your God."[19] Taken alone, such a verse could be imported into a modern context as a prohibition against cross-dressing or gender nonconformity more broadly. Yet the verse does not

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[18] Leviticus 21:6, NRSVue.
[19] Deuteronomy 22:5, NRSVue.

stand alone. To understand this verse, it is important to read it in light of the verses which surround it. In this chapter of Deuteronomy, we also have prohibitions against mixing different types of seeds (verse 9), animals (verse 10), and fabrics (verse 11). As commentators on this section explain, these regulations are intended to maintain the integrity of a well-ordered creation: "One of the ways the purity of the people is maintained… is the insistence that *things be kept in order and not mixed up inappropriately*."[20] Whether it is the clothing people wear or the way they arrange their crops and animals, keeping things in their proper order is a way to honor the patterns of creation and to uphold their very society: "Regulations protecting these boundaries act like fences to keep everything in its place and to prevent the falling apart of society as a result of a breach in the invisible boundaries that contain it."[21] Clearly, then, the stakes for these regulations were high. Taken together, the assorted regulations found in these chapters preserve a well-ordered society and construct an identity that is distinctive to Israel.

For contemporary Christian readers, what are the applications of these texts? How do they inform debates about the acceptance and inclusion of

[20] Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, *Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 162.
[21] Clements, 452.

transgender people? In his experience as a transgender man, Austen Hartke describes reading Deuteronomy 23:1 and wondering "whether this verse was meant as a prohibition against any kind of bodily modification of sex characteristics."[22] Hartke has experienced how this verse can be used to exclude transgender people from church communities: "We still find ourselves standing on the steps of many churches wondering if we'll be allowed in."[23] Similarly, the regulation about clothing in Deuteronomy 22:5 can be used to argue against transgender people wearing clothing that aligns with their gender identity rather than their sex assigned at birth. However, such a use of these two verses is highly problematic, not least because of the glaring contextual distance. These verses are nestled within a complex legal structure that constructs and defines a specific ancient society, and it would be disingenuous to suggest that Deuteronomy 23:1 or 22:5 applies to contemporary churches while the rest of the legal system around it does not.[24] For instance, would churches also prohibit the admission of any child born out of wedlock or disqualify people based on the ethnicity of their ancestors, as other verses in Deuteronomy 23 would require? Furthermore, if Deuteronomy 23:1 is read as a condemnation of transgender people having

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[22] Hartke, 88.
[23] Hartke, 95.
[24] See Sabia-Tanis, 66.

gender confirmation surgery, it would follow that a direct application of Deuteronomy 23:1 would equally exclude a person with testicular cancer who underwent surgery to remove the affected areas—an exclusionary policy that would rightly be seen as outrageous. These verses cannot be lifted selectively from their context and applied in a simplistic way to a modern context that is not the one for which they were written.

For eunuchs in ancient Israel, however, the impact of these restrictions was clear. Leviticus forbids the service of priests whose physical characteristics were understood as a blemish polluting the purity of ritual worship. Deuteronomy 23:1 extends this prohibition to all those seeking admission "to the assembly of the LORD," reflecting its emphasis on the clear boundaries of a well-ordered Israelite society. Eunuchs reading this text would find a clear voice of exclusion. However, even within the biblical corpus, the limits of these uncompromising restrictions are called into question. Deuteronomy speaks a clear word of exclusion, but it is not the only word spoken in the Hebrew Bible. As we turn our attention now to the book of Isaiah, we find an alternative vision that counters the exclusionary perspective found in Deuteronomy 23.

Isaiah: A Hopeful Promise of Inclusion

The fifty-sixth chapter of Isaiah begins the section of the book which scholars describe as Third Isaiah, or Trito-Isaiah. Beginning with an injunction to do what is right and just, Isaiah quickly addresses the situation of foreigners and eunuchs:

> [3] Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people," and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." [4] For thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, [5] I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.[25]

This beautiful passage, which proceeds to offer a similar word of welcome to foreigners, is remarkable not just for its poetry but also for the striking contrast it sets up with Deuteronomy 23. As seen above, Deuteronomy's verses exclude eunuchs and certain foreigners from entrance into the assembly of the LORD. Yet the words of Isaiah ring out a promise of hope. How can this be? What has changed? An understanding of the context of Isaiah's writing is instructive.

Biblical scholars have long recognized three distinct sections in the book of Isaiah, though there are different theories about how precisely the book came

[25] Isaiah 56:3-5, NRSVue.

into its current form.[26] Isaiah 1-39, or "First Isaiah," largely contains oracles of judgement and predictions of the downfall of Jerusalem and its people. After the prophesied destruction comes to fruition, Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) offers words of hope and consolation to the exiles in Babylon. Finally, Third Isaiah speaks to the situation of the exiles who have returned to Jerusalem and are rebuilding their community. Noting the diversity of material in chapters 56-66, Joseph Blenkinsopp joins other scholars in suggesting that this is a collection of various writings, which "do not come from one hand or from one time period."[27]

This setting in the post-exilic community is significant for understanding what is at stake in Isaiah's message of inclusion. As Brueggemann observes, such a transitional moment is a time when significant theological negotiation takes place: "a time of rebuilding and reshaping calls for disputation among competing visions of the future."[28] Central among the questions at hand was the matter of who constituted the legitimate people of Israel. How is membership in the community to be determined, particularly in the cultural intermixing that takes place as exiles return from Babylon? This is a question that was being hotly

[26] Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, *Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 3-7.

[27] Blenkinsopp, 59.

[28] Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 168.

contested at the time, and Blenkinsopp observes how this is evident in the perspectives of different biblical texts: "Whereas Ezra insists on communal purity that some regard as severe as 'ethnic cleansing' (see Ezra 9:1-4), these verses move in a very different, inclusive direction."[29] Isaiah 56 paints a picture of an inclusive society where communal identity is not based on physical characteristics or nationality but on standards of behavior and practice that are open even to previously excluded eunuchs and foreigners. In other words, "the condition for maintaining one's status is to hold fast to the covenant and observe the Sabbath as the external and visible sign of the observant life."[30] What prompted such a radical shift?

Part of the explanation is found in the difficulty and complications of postexilic life. Despite the poetic reassurance of the preceding chapters of Isaiah, the return to Jerusalem was difficult and disorienting: "Those who returned to Zion sadly did not experience the fulfillment of Second Isaiah's brilliant promises of prosperity and peace and joy."[31] It was no small matter to reconstitute a national identity in the aftermath of decades of destruction, assimilation, and turmoil. Furthermore, for some of those returning from Babylon, there was no

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[29] Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 170.
[30] Blenkinsopp, 84.
[31] Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*, *Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1995), 187.

way to reverse the physical effects of the exile. Specifically, consider this prophetic warning from Isaiah in Isaiah 39:7: “Some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away; they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.”[32] For those who had been made eunuchs during the exile, what is to be their status within the reconstituted society that was taking shape? Hartke describes the dilemma this question posed for the Israelite community: “If Deuteronomy 23:1 did indeed prohibit eunuchs from entering into the assembly of the Lord, how could these marginalized people be reintegrated into the new society?”[33] Addressing this pressing question may indeed have been the occasion for the inclusive new vision of Isaiah.[34]

It is within this context that Isaiah brings a word of hope for eunuchs and foreigners. Verse 4 lists the requirements that God places upon eunuchs, as a promising word is addressed to those “who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant.” This marks a notable shift to practice as the defining feature of membership in the community. As Paul Hanson notes, “Obedience and covenant fidelity, especially in relation to Sabbath

[32] Isaiah 39:7, NRSVue.
[33] Hartke, 93.
[34] Walter Brueggemann agrees: “We may suspect that the claim of 56:3-5 is to readmit those tragic figures destined for the role of eunuch in 39:7.” Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 171.

observance, are such decisive issues that they are capable of overriding ritual considerations such as bodily defects."[35] This shift was a significant moment in the development of early Judaism, and it continues to have reverberations for contemporary people of faith. Describing the implications of this for transgender people like him, Justin Sabia-Tanis writes,

> "For transgendered persons who have a sense of an internal reality that is or may be in conflict with our physical bodies, the prophet speaks a word that focuses us on the faithfulness of our lives, not on the particularities of our bodies. God's emphasis is not on where our bodies came from or how they have been altered, but rather on the ways in which we practice our faith. Justice, inclusion, and faithfulness become the primary indicators of people who are acceptable to God."[36]

When the emphasis shifts from external physical features to faithfulness of practice, new avenues for inclusion are opened.

Isaiah's words of hope and inclusion for eunuchs promise a new reality for eunuchs themselves and a transformation for the larger community. For eunuchs who saw themselves as "just a dry tree" with no hope of descendants to carry on their name and legacy, Isaiah promises them an alternative way that their memory will be sustained within the community. The description of "a

[35] Hanson, 194.
[36] Sabia-Tanis, 70.

monument and a name"[37] would call to mind the example of 2 Samuel 18:18, in which the childless Absalom builds a pillar and gives it his name, explaining, "I have no son to keep my name in remembrance."[38] In this case, however, perhaps even more significant is the location that verse five describes for this monument and name: "in my house and within my walls."[39] Likewise, in the verses that follow God promises foreigners a place on "my mountain" and "in my house of prayer."[40] What a contrast this makes to Deuteronomy 23, where eunuchs and foreigners are denied entry into the assembly!

As the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are shifted, Isaiah speaks a word of promise that also leaves the community itself transformed.[41] It is a community with a changed standard of membership focused on faithful practice, and it is also a community with new responsibilities: "The community of Judaism is to be a community that remembers, cherishes, and preserves the name and identity of those otherwise nullified in an uncaring world."[42] Granted, it is not clear if this vision was fully realized in the life of the community. Some

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[37] The Hebrew words here, "yad vashem," provide the name for the Holocaust Memorial in Israel.
[38] 2 Samuel 18:18, NRSVue.
[39] Blenkinsopp, 139.
[40] Isaiah 56:7, NRSVue.
[41] Hartke, 99.
[42] Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 171.

scholars view this more as an eschatological hope than as practical instruction.[43] The very existence of a passage like this, promising inclusion for eunuchs and foreigners, reveals that this was not the reception they experienced or anticipated.[44] And yet, the prophetic assertion is a novel inbreaking of good news that would have been a welcome surprise to those who had assumed the exclusion of Deuteronomy 23 was the final word.

MATTHEW: COMPLEXITY AND AFFIRMATION

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus makes one reference to eunuchs, an enigmatic passage that follows a discussion of divorce:

> "But he said to them, 'Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.'"[45]

Typical of many commentators, Douglas Hare describes these verses as "among the most difficult to understand in the Gospel" and proceeds to say little more about them, aside from a passing reference to celibacy.[46] Part of the challenge is

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[43] Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, *Anchor Bible Reference Library* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 194.
[44] Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 170.
[45] Matthew 19:11-12, NRSVue.
[46] Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, *Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 222.

the ambiguity of the language, as verse 11 refers to “this teaching” without specifying whether it refers to the preceding discussion of divorce or the following verse about eunuchs. Additionally, it is unclear precisely how the saying about eunuchs relates to the preceding teaching or to what precisely it refers. Nevertheless, as the only place in Scripture where Jesus references eunuchs, it is a passage worthy of our attention, revealing several insights about eunuchs and enriching our understanding of how this topic informs contemporary conversations.

Most scholars understand the last phrase of the passage, describing those who “have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven,” as a reference to celibacy. Eugene Boring, for instance, hears this phrase as a reference to “members of the community who choose to remain celibate in order to commit themselves fully to Christian work.”[47] Even so, there are examples of people who have taken Jesus’ words literally. Famously, Origen is said to have had himself castrated in the early 3rd century, something that was evidently not an entirely unusual occurrence.[48] For the most part, however, people generally understand Jesus’s words as a reference to those who abstain from sexual

[47] M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 387.
[48] See Brown, 168-69.

activity in service to their religious devotion. This was not a mandate from Christ, nor was it directed at everyone, but Jesus commends this path as virtuous for those to whom it is given.

It would be a mistake, however, to say that voluntary celibacy is all that Jesus is describing.[49] His reference to eunuchs involves a distinction between three types of eunuchs. The third can be understood well as a reference to voluntary celibacy, though it is also possible to take his words literally to refer to those who castrated themselves for religious reasons. The other two types, however, can not readily be explained away as metaphors for celibacy. His reference to those who are eunuchs from birth might be understood as a reference to people born with intersex characteristics, or it might be understood as a reference to people who are unable to have children.[50] His second classification, those forcibly made eunuchs by others, may refer to people who were made eunuchs by a conquering army, as seen above in the treatment of some Israelites in Babylon. Alternatively, men may have been made eunuchs in order to engage in religious practices or for the sake of prostitution.[51]

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[49] Sabia-Tanis, 73.
[50] See Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8:20: A Commentary*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss, *Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 501.
[51] Mollenkott, 120.

Regardless of the precise meaning of each classification, however, merely the fact that Jesus distinguishes these three groups is significant. Jesus adds complexity and nuance in his description of people who might have otherwise been scorned broadly and dismissed out of hand. References to eunuchs in other parts of Scripture, such as the prohibition in Deuteronomy 23:1, do not make such distinctions. In his reading of this passage, Sabia-Tanis highlights this appreciation that Jesus shows for complexity: "We see in the words of Jesus an acceptance and acknowledgement of gender diversity."[52] Jesus attends to the multiplicity of ways that people experience gender; even within the category of "eunuch," there are multiple different types of experience that deserve to be seen in their specificity.

Furthermore, it is essential to observe that in this passage, the only recorded instance when Jesus refers to eunuchs, he does so with appreciation rather than scorn. Virginia Mollenkott writes, "Jesus' words about eunuchs in Matthew 19:12 reveal an accepting, respectful attitude that ought to be the norm for the modern church."[53] Along the same lines, Hartke notes that "Jesus singles out eunuchs, the gender-nonconforming people of the ancient world, as an

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[52] Sabia-Tanis, 75.
[53] Mollenkott, 136.

example of people uniquely gifted for discipleship in the kingdom of heaven."[54] It is not merely that Jesus tolerates eunuchs or advocates for their acceptance. Jesus speaks positively of them as having something unique to contribute "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." Jesus acknowledges that his remarks may not be welcomed by all listeners: "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given." Nevertheless, he continues to speak favorably of eunuchs and their contributions. For contemporary churches seeking to adopt a similar position of affirmation, Hartke sounds a positive note of hope: "transgender people are not a burden for Christianity, or for the church. They come bearing gifts!"[55]

ACTS: INCLUSION TANGIBLY REALIZED

The final passage we will consider is found in the eighth chapter of Acts, which recounts the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. This episode, the final time a eunuch is explicitly described in the Bible, provides a remarkable description of inclusion and welcome into the emerging Christian community. Biblical scholars note that in some ways this story stands alone

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[54] Hartke, 102.
[55] Hartke, 105.

within the narrative of Acts, having a "fairy-tale quality" and making "no tangible impact upon the rest of Acts."[56] Later passages in the book make no mention of this event. And yet, within the trajectory of the narrative, this passage marks an important moment in the development of the action. Specifically, the designation of the figure as Ethiopian is significant. The precise meaning of the term is debated, but scholars generally understand it to mean that the eunuch is "from an exotic region in Africa (probably not modern Ethiopia, but Sudan or Nubia to the south of Egypt—one of the 'ends of the earth')."[57] A person from such a distance would have been of interest to readers of the text simply for being "an intriguing, romantic, even exotic personage."[58] However, there is a deeper significance at play, connecting back to the first chapter of Acts, when Jesus sends out his disciples with the charge to be "my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."[59] Beverly Gaventa notes that the episode with the Ethiopian eunuch, coming just after Philip has preached in Samaria, exemplifies the realization of the trajectory Jesus set forth, marking "the threshold of the worldwide mission as yet another announcement of that

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[56] Pervo, 221.
[57] Brown, 297.
[58] Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Ethiopian Eunuch," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 667.
[59] Acts 1:8, NRSVue.

mission."[60] In this sense, the ethnic identity of the eunuch as an Ethiopian is significant to the development of the narrative.

It is important, however, not simply to read the Ethiopian identity of this person as a narrative device. For contemporary American readers aware of the racial dynamics present in our society, it is vital to be attentive to the implications of race in the texts we are reading, even while acknowledging the distance between the ancient world and modern perspectives on race. As Gay Bryon explains, "critical theories about race and ethnicity should inform all aspects of interpretation: the ancient texts and (con)texts; the interpretations of these texts; and the interpreters themselves."[61] Ignoring the ethnicity of a character from Africa is not a neutral choice. Commenting on this passage, Byron writes,

> the ethnopolitical rhetoric about this Ethiopian black man is worth identifying and analyzing, especially given the ways in which it calls attention to the ascetic influences reflected in the text and the ways in which it idealizes this virtuous "black man" as humble, silent, illiterate, and passive—effectively, representing the extremes to whom Christianity could extend. The implications for such an ideal figure for contemporary African American males and constructions of progressive black masculinities is significant.[62]

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[60] Gaventa, 667.
[61] Gay L. Byron, "Ancient Ethiopia and the New Testament: Ethnic (Con)Texts and Racialized (Sub)Texts," in *They Were All Together in One Place? : Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 180.
[62] Byron, 176.

Seen in this light, the narrative in Acts 8 contains layers that must be explored by modern readers. While the focus of the present work is on the portrayal of eunuchs in the Bible, attending to the ethnicity of the character brings into focus the significance of intersectionality when discussing issues of gender. Gender is not experienced in a vacuum; it interacts in significant ways with race, wealth, language, class, and other identities. These intersections are present both in modern life and in the narrative found in Acts.

With this complexity in mind, let us consider the depiction of the Ethiopian eunuch. Will Willimon cautions readers "not to consider the Ethiopian as a despised or deprived person—quite the opposite. He is a powerful, though exotic, court official, a well-placed and significant person who is receptive to the truth."[63] Indeed, the mere fact that this figure has traveled such a distance to worship in Jerusalem implies a certain wealth and prestige. Nevertheless, the implications of being a eunuch should also not be minimized. Scott Spencer explains the paradoxical nature of this figure: "He appears as a well-to-do public official of some prominence, and yet at the same time, he bears as a castrated man a certain ignominy reserved only for the lowest classes in the ancient

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[63] William H. Willimon, *Acts*, *Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 72.

world."[64] The Ethiopian eunuch evades simple characterization, for his identities intersect in complicated ways.

These identities also come to light in the context of the passage that the Ethiopian eunuch is reading aloud as the story unfolds. The passage from Isaiah 53, one of the servant songs that were influential in shaping early Christian theology,[65] describes someone who is humiliated, deprived of justice, and led to slaughter like a lamb silently brought to its shearer. While Philip explains this depiction as referring to Jesus, the features described by Isaiah may also have resonated with the life experience and suffering of the eunuch, who had known humiliation and injustice personally. In his exploration of this text, Austen Hartke shows how this resonance continues for transgender people reading the passage today:

> Trans people experience humiliation when we're outed without our permission, when we're kicked out of our homes, when we're accused of being dangerous to children and cisgender women, and when we're dismissed as mentally ill. We are denied justice when we're fired from our jobs because of our gender identity, when laws are made to keep us out of public bathroom facilities, when trans women are profiled as sex workers, and when religious gatekeepers deny trans Christians the ability to join with other people of faith in praising God. Worst of all, we find ourselves

[64] Spencer, 173.
[65] Robert W. Wall, "The Acts of the Apostles," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. X (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 143-44.

> like those sheep led to slaughter, as the lives of Black transgender women and other trans people of color are violently taken from this earth.[66]

This powerful parallel demonstrates the resonance that this passage continues to have for transgender readers of the text, who see themselves in both the eunuch and in the earlier words the eunuch is reading. Hartke is also helpful in highlighting the ways that Black transgender women disproportionately face violence because of the intersections of their particular identities.

In Acts 8, it is the Ethiopian eunuch's intersecting identities that present the conceptual challenge for Philip and the early Christian community more broadly. The Ethiopian eunuch's question to Philip—"What is to prevent me from being baptized?"[67]—is not an abstract, philosophical musing. It is a question of identity and belonging within the community. The Ethiopian eunuch is justified in wondering whether it would be possible for him to find inclusion in the community. Specifically, as a foreigner and a eunuch, he would have faced double exclusion in the restrictions of Deuteronomy 23. On the other hand, Isaiah 56 offered both groups a promise of entrance into the community. The question posed by the Ethiopian eunuch, a person who embodied "both these

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[66] Hartke, 123-24.
[67] Acts 8:36, NRSVue.

disenfranchised, disinherited groups,"[68] is to ask Philip which posture it will be, exclusion or inclusion. In answer, they walk together into the waters of baptism.

This episode, then, offers a tangible embodiment of the promise offered by Isaiah 56. Even here, though, the welcome continues to expand. Comparing the two passages, Spencer notes the development that takes place here: "despite the similarities between Luke and Isaiah, Luke goes significantly further in endorsing open access for eunuchs into the covenant community."[69] Absent from Acts are the conditions of behavior that are delineated by Isaiah, such as observance of the Sabbath. The eunuch need not demonstrate his faithfulness or his worthiness in the community. Furthermore, it is significant that his identity as a eunuch is not a matter of debate, nor is it silenced in the telling of the story. Justin Sabia-Tanis observes that the eunuch "is not baptized in spite of being a eunuch or after a lengthy session of apologetics explaining his gender to Philip."[70] His status as a eunuch is simply stated as a fact, one that is ultimately immaterial to his inclusion in the community. Sabia-Tanis proceeds to draw out the implications of this treatment for contemporary questions of gender: "In this

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[68] Wall, 143.
[69] Spencer, 171.
[70] Sabia-Tanis, 79.

story, we see that God does not ask us to put aside who we are in order to be a part of the community of faith, but rather calls us as we are in our specificity."[71]

CONCLUSION: FOUR VOICES

What is to be made of the four distinct passages considered in this chapter? To be sure, the Bible does not present a unified perspective on eunuchs. How should contemporary interpreters understand this variety? To start, it is helpful to recognize the ways that the passages in question are intricately connected to the questions and needs of the religious community at the time they were written. The detailed instructions and parameters of Deuteronomy help to establish a clear national identity and system of worship. Isaiah's more inclusive vision emerged as the post-exilic community sought to address the questions it faced, particularly in light to the needs of its specific members, including eunuchs and those without solely Israelite family backgrounds. Likewise, the words of Jesus and the narrative in Acts help guide the emerging Christian community as it gains clarity about its scope and practices. Specifically, the book of Acts repeatedly depicts ways in which the community is pressing beyond

[71] Sabia-Tanis, 79.

earlier boundaries concerning what and who was seen as acceptable. Consider, for instance, these words from Peter: "You yourselves know that it is improper for a Jew to associate with or to visit an outsider, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean."[72]

In the book of Acts, this expansion is continually attributed to the work of the Spirit, which figures prominently in the narrative. The Spirit sets events in motion to bring together Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. In their encounter and throughout the book, the unlikely events of Acts, Will Willimon argues, "can only be attributed to the constant prodding of the Spirit. … No triumphal, crusading enthusiasm has motivated the church up to this point, no mushy all embracing desire to be inclusive of everyone and everything. Rather, in being obedient to the Spirit, preachers like Philip find themselves in the oddest of situations with the most surprising sorts of people."[73] Contemporary churches can find in the example of Scripture a helpful parallel for the situations they face. Like the biblical authors, congregations today must respond to their communities' questions and the needs of the specific people within them,

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[72] From Acts 10:28, NRSVue.
[73] Willimon, 72.

trusting in the Spirit of God to continue leading, even in ways that move beyond restrictive understandings of the past.

In such a project, the Bible's treatment of eunuchs provides a helpful example. As we have seen in this chapter, the four passages we have studied—from Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Matthew, and Acts—each takes a different approach to eunuchs. One plausible interpretation of this diverse witness is to trace a gradual arc from exclusion to inclusion. In such a view, Deuteronomy clearly sets forth a restrictive position toward eunuchs, forbidding their entrance into the assembly. Isaiah offers a more welcoming stance, even if the inclusion here is conditional and oriented to the future. The words of Jesus further the positive message of Isaiah, which finally is implemented tangibly in Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch. Conceptualizing this trajectory can be helpful, not least because it mirrors a common experience of contemporary individuals and congregations: from a skeptical stance toward gender-expansive people, to a more positive reception that imagines inclusion "one day," to appreciating greater nuance, and then to an eventual full welcome into the life of the community.

Even as this trajectory can be a helpful way to understand the varying perspectives toward eunuchs in the Bible, it is important not to overstate this

dynamic. For one thing, it is necessary to guard against an antisemitic tendency to describe a legalistic mindset that is part of Judaism in the past, which is replaced by an "enlightened" Christianity. The inclusive words of Isaiah are also part of the Hebrew Bible, and the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch may well be recorded precisely because this figure's incorporation was such a startling event, suggesting that the embrace of eunuchs in early Christianity was hardly something to be assumed and celebrated. Even beyond this caution, however, there is a deeper reason not to overstate the trajectory toward inclusion by arguing that the later passages replace the earlier, restrictive ones. This is simply not how the Bible functions: Genesis 2 does not replace Genesis 1. Therefore, rather than explaining away the differences in how Scripture treats eunuchs as a gradual progression in which new perspectives replace those which came before, it is helpful to recognize that all these perspectives exist within the Bible simultaneously. The Bible does not speak with one voice about eunuchs. While the overall thrust of the narrative moves toward inclusion, it is significant that other voices are not silenced.

As contemporary readers seek to understand how the Bible would guide congregations in their stance toward transgender and gender-expansive people, this model is illuminating. Just as there are multiple voices present in Scripture,

there are similarly diverse perspectives present in any congregation. Furthermore, these various impulses can be identified within the mind of an individual person. Perhaps part of the lesson to be taken from the Bible's treatment of eunuchs is that each perspective is allowed to be voiced and may have value in certain circumstances. In such a reading, Deuteronomy demonstrates the impulse to draw definite boundaries, to be clear about group identity, and to find security in a simple and well-ordered system of thought. Isaiah represents the impulse to imagine a better possible world, recognizing how God may lead us into a new reality that expands beyond our current limitations and restrictions. The words of Jesus in Matthew represent a voice that honors complexity, finds value in difference, and recognizes the diverse ways that people are called to live and serve, even without universal understanding and agreement. Finally, the book of Acts demonstrates an inclusive embrace in response to the specific human being standing before us, even when this requires rethinking traditional practices and stepping into unfamiliar territory.

For many congregations seeking to understand contemporary perspectives on gender and deciding how to respond, it is likely that voices similar to these will emerge in the conversation. Each of these impulses has value. This is not to say that all perspectives are equally valid or that any

congregational action is equally appropriate and faithful. Decisions about inclusive policies matter, and they have a significant impact on real people. Yet the Bible also provides a powerful example of holding space for diverse perspectives, even as the narrative moves steadily toward the inclusion of eunuchs in the community of faith. In the next chapter we will explore further how difference is navigated in congregations, drawing on the wisdom of Galatians 3:28. Such a process is not easy, but the Bible's words about eunuchs offer a path forward, holding space for difference while ultimately affirming the inclusion of all.

Chapter 5: "No Longer Male and Female" in Galatians 3:28

Nestled at the center of Paul's letter to the Galatians is a verse that has intrigued and captivated its readers for centuries: "There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."[1] Paul does not proceed to explain the meaning of these poetic words, leaving open a range of interpretive possibilities. Does this verse describe merely an ideal to which human communities can aspire? Does the verse imply the destruction of identity categories that many people consider fundamental to their lives? What are the practical applications of such a statement in the lived experience of Christians in a particular society? These complex questions resist easy answers, yet the richness of Galatians 3:28 is well suited to help contemporary readers as they wrestle with these issues. In this chapter, we will consider the interpretive possibilities of this fascinating verse from several angles, exploring this text as a guide for thinking through gender beyond the binary. We will then explore some practical implications for churches seeking what it means to live in Christ, where there is "no longer male and female." Finally, we close by considering how churches can navigate

[1] Galatians 3:28, NRSVue.

disagreement around these and other sensitive matters, finding their ultimate unity in Christ. In each of these areas, Galatians 3:28 provides a helpful starting point for a rich and rewarding exploration.

A NEW CREATION WITH A NEW IDENTITY

Galatians 3:28 describes the oneness that is found in Christ by denying three categories of contrasting identities: Jew/Greek, slave/free, and male/female. After listing the first two pairs, however, Paul departs from the grammatical pattern he has started by switching the conjunction from "or" to "and": male *and* female. Is this departure significant? While there are multiple ways to interrogate this alteration, many scholars understand this as a deliberate choice on Paul's part, one that intentionally seeks to mirror the language used in the first chapter of Genesis.[2] Paul hearkens back to Genesis 1:27, where humanity is created "male and female." By alluding to this familiar verse, Paul reinforces his broader argument that a new creation has taken place "in Christ." Galatians 3:28, then, does not merely narrate a reordering of the current social structure that now involves equality rather than hierarchical division. As Louis Martyn explains,

[2] Eugene F. Rogers, "Doctrine and Sexuality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. Adrian Thatcher (Oxford University Press, 2014).

"Religious, social, and sexual pairs of opposites are not replaced by equality, but rather by a newly created unity."[3] Something fundamentally new has been created in Christ, and it is this new creation that Paul is describing here.

For Christians, this new creation is found in the waters of baptism, a connection that Paul explicitly makes in the preceding verse: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."[4] Paul's description of the unity in Christ is a description of what happens when Christians are baptized and "put on" Christ. Many scholars, in fact, contend that Galatians 3:28 was originally part of the baptismal liturgy of the early church, which Paul invokes here for the purposes of his argument.[5] Similar language is repeated in Colossians 3:11 and 1 Corinthians 12:13. Paul describes a transformation of identity that takes place in baptism, asserting that a unified new creation is found in Christ. Galatians 3:28, then, helps define this new creation in the Christian community. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza puts it, this passage is "best understood as a communal Christian self-definition rather than a statement about the baptized individual. It proclaims that in the Christian

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[3] J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 33A (New Haven: The Anchor Yale Bible, 1997), 377.
[4] Galatians 3:27, NRSVue.
[5] For instance, see Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues*, Second ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 92.

community all distinctions of religion, race, class, nationality, and gender are insignificant. All the baptized are equal, they are one in Christ."[6] For Fiorenza, equality is the central message of this verse. The key question that persists, however, is this: what do we make of the existing divisions that Paul is negating? Do these differences continue to matter in some way? Moreover, do the differences even continue to exist?

Amy-Jill Levine provides an important word of critique and caution that should inform interpretations of this passage. Describing how the early church became predominately Gentile, Levine writes, "Paul's vision that 'there is no longer Jew or Greek ... in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28) is not good news for Jews, whose identity is then erased."[7] Levine describes the danger of a universalizing interpretation that entails "an erasure of Jewish (and Greek) identity."[8] It is vital to remain mindful of this danger. A reading of Galatians 3:28 that argues for unity by way of obliterating difference is deeply problematic. Such a reading risks perpetuating the anti-Semitism that has too often seeped into Christian theology, as Levine rightly observes. It is also unfaithful to the deep complexity

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[6] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 213.
[7] Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 84.
[8] Levine, 114.

of Pauline thought regarding Jews and Gentiles, a subject that is treated extensively in his letter to the Romans, which we will briefly consider below. At this point, however, the question to consider is how readers of this passage can understand the unity Paul describes in Christ without automatically erasing identities that people hold as meaningful. This is a challenge that many interpreters address directly.

In his reading of the text, Austen Hartke asks whether Paul is advocating "sameness" or "oneness," a helpful distinction: "either it means that we're all whitewashed and homogenized and our differences are erased… or it means that we're called to find a way to make our different identities fit together, like the bright shards in assorted colors that make up the stained glass windows of a cathedral."[9] Such a reading hopes for a new unity that is found in holding together a beautiful diversity of individuals who retain their distinctiveness. Other scholars agree that even though a new unity is described in this verse, other identities remain. Victor Furnish describes how Paul's audience in the letter "continued to exist in the world as Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female,"[10] and yet these roles were understood to be transformed: "The racial, national,

[9] Hartke, 161.
[10] Furnish, 111.

legal, and sexual identities were not destroyed, but they were transcended and their meaning was relativized."[11] The old identities remain, and yet they are transcended and understood in a new way.

Louis Martyn helps explain this tension by appealing to Paul's eschatology, which held that "genuine, eschatological life commences when one is taken into the community of the new creation in which unity in God's Christ has replaced religious-ethnic differentiation."[12] In Christ, a new unity is created that transcends all difference, and yet people continue to live their lives in a world in which those distinctions are consequential. To quote Hartke again, "This is one of the mysteries of life as a Christian: we are citizens of two worlds at once. We're human beings who live in a time when things like gender, class, and race are all important to our understandings of ourselves and each other; yet we're also called to be part of a new kingdom where things like sexism, poverty, slavery, and racism no longer exist."[13] The tension of living in both of these worlds is reflected in the writings of Paul, who describes the new creation beautifully while simultaneously giving practical instruction that retains the differences he suggest have been overcome.

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[11] Furnish, 111.
[12] Martyn, 382-83.
[13] Hartke, 164.

Furthermore, just as this eschatological tension exists within the Christian community, there is also a corresponding tension between the community and the world around it. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explains that many features of Paul's letters, including the household codes that preserve hierarchical structures, demonstrate the "tension between the alternative Christian community and the larger society," for the Christian movement provided an alternative to traditional Greco-Roman society, "a conflict movement which stood in tension with the institutions of slavery and the patriarchal family."[14] The implications of this tension are complex, particularly with regard to how the differences are treated in society at large. It is to this questions that we now turn.

APPLYING GALATIANS 3:28

There are many different ways to apply the message of Galatians 3:28, interpretations that vary based on the perspective of the reader. Dale B. Martin provides an illuminating overview of the historical interpretations of this passage, observing that "the interpretation of the verse has shifted through the ages, reflecting changing social situations and norms and the shifting interests of

[14] Fiorenza, 216.

interpreters from the ancient period to the modern and postmodern."[15] Martin helpfully recognizes patterns in the ways this verse has been read, delineating several distinct lines of interpretation. Without repeating all the specifics of his argument, the broad strokes of these categories are helpful.

First, Martin describes the position he sees as the majority view in most mainline scholarship, which treats Galatians 3:28 as a text fundamentally about equality.[16] Because male and female have been revealed as equal in Christ, men's and women's roles and rights in society should correspondingly be equal.[17] Scholars in this perspective acknowledge that Paul's writings do not always live up to the vision of equality he has penned. As Raymond Brown observes, "the same Paul who phrased it was capable of sanctioning inequality among Christians."[18] And yet, Brown points out that "many Christians recognize a gospel dynamism in Pauls' statement that may or even should go beyond his vision."[19] In other words, Galatians 3:28 points to an equality that is true to the Gospel, even though it is imperfectly reflected in Paul's writings. Importantly for our purposes, Martin points out that in understanding the verse this way, this

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[15] Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 77.
[16] Martin, 78-79.
[17] See, for instance, the work of Fiorenza, quoted above.
[18] Brown, 480.
[19] Brown, 480.

"liberal-egalitarian" interpretation maintains a binary view of gender: "the verse is read as addressing the issue of gender by recognizing the reality of a dimorphic, dualistic, male-female gender construction and advocating equality between the two sides of the dualism."[20] The gender binary is maintained and even reinforced by the assertion of equality between the two genders.

The second interpretive approach Martin identifies is more typical of contemporary conservative settings, as well as scholarship before the latter half of the twentieth century. This view agrees that male and female are equal "in Christ" but denies that this equality applies to society more broadly, preserving hierarchical roles for women and men in the church and the home.[21] Such a view finds support in the many passages where Paul's letters speak about men and women in different ways. Galatians 3:28, then, is understood to argue that while men and women are equal with respect to justification and salvation, unequal roles and sexual differentiation remain.[22] Again, as with the first mode of interpretation, it is important to note that the binary nature of gender goes unchallenged. Martin notes a certain irony in this aspect of both interpretive

[20] Martin, 78.
[21] Martin, 79.
[22] Martin, 80.

strategies: "the phrase 'no male and female' is read as recognizing, not negating, the male-female dichotomy in nature or creation or human experience."[23]

In contrast, some interpretations of Galatians focus not on equality but on the end of "male and female" itself. Martin traces how these arguments emerge in the interpretive criticism of third wave feminism, which draws on writings of the early church. One line of thinking looks back to a primeval time before the current division of male and female. The androgynous human being found there at the time of creation is also humanity's eschatological destiny.[24] Paul's words about "no male and female" hearken back to this original, androgynous humanity, which is now restored in Christ.[25] Influential in this area of scholarship is the article by Wayne Meeks, "Image of the Androgyne." In this article, Meeks contends that in baptism the Genesis division of male and female is reversed and humanity is no longer divided.[26] In baptism is found "the reunification of male and female,"[27] which consists of "an eschatological restoration of man's original divine, androgynous image."[28] According to this interpretation, the

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23 Martin, 82.
24 Of note, the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, examined in the third chapter of the present work, align with this ideological perspective.
25 Martin, 83.
26 Wayne A. Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," *History of Religions* 13, no. 3 (1974): 185, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1061813.
27 Meeks, 207.
28 Meeks, 197.

eschatological reunification of male and female is what Paul is describing in Galatians 3:28. Other scholars, following the lead of Thomas Laqueur, argue that the ancient perspective was not that of an androgyny characterized by neither male nor female; rather, gender divisions were thought to be overcome when the female becomes male.[29] This perspective makes sense of the closing verse of the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, which recounts Jesus saying, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven."[30] In either case, however—whether a return to an original androgynous humanity or the subsuming of the female into the male—the takeaway of the argument is that Paul's "no male and female" describes the end of humanity's separation into categories of male and female.

When tracing the interpretation history of Galatians 3:28, Martin comes down on the side of seeing this latter type of interpretation as more accurately reflecting Paul's intentions than readings focused on equality.[31] However, Martin also questions whether historical criticism is the appropriate standard to use when approaching the biblical text. Alternatively, queer readings of the text can

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[29] Martin, 83-84.
[30] *Gospel of Thomas*, v. 14.
[31] Martin, 88.

open up new avenues of thinking, something Martin sees as particularly appropriate for this passage: "I suggest that we'd be better off recognizing just how queer a text Galatians 3:28 is."[32] Because this passage undercuts divisions in identity categories, it can be read in a variety of ways that subvert typical assumptions and expectations. Chief among these assumptions is the idea of a stable gender binary. Colleen Conway agrees that such a reading of Genesis 3:28 opens room for broader understandings of gender: "There is more to human gender construction than these two options, so in saying no to them, we dispense with the idea that one must be either male or female."[33] This approach employs Paul's denial of "male and female" as a liberating rejection of the gender binary. Similarly, in her description of the performativity of gender, Mary McClintock Fulkerson wonders whether "it is time to read Galatians 3:28 with a new literalness, admitting that we are all performing our sex/gender."[34] Because Paul's words undercut the existence of fixed identity categories, room is opened to see them as performative creations instead.

[32] Martin, 90.
[33] Colleen M. Conway, "The Construction of Gender in the New Testament," in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. Adrian Thatcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 229.
[34] Fulkerson, 199.

CIRCUMCISION, IDENTITY, AND GENDER

While Galatians 3:28 provides significant insights for our consideration of male and female, it is important to note that the book of Galatians as a whole has relatively little to say about gender. Instead, the primary focus of the text is the first pairing in verse 28: Jew and Greek. Paul's emphasis in the letter is his response to the debates taking place in the Galatian church, and some attention to these questions is warranted. Evidently, some in the community were teaching that Christians must continue to be circumcised and must continue to follow the Jewish laws. Paul's letter to the Galatians consists of a series of arguments showing why they need not do so.[35] It is in the middle of these arguments that Paul includes the famous verse that is the focus of our attention. Paul's letter draws to a close with a dramatic statement of his argument: "For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but a new creation is everything!"[36] This verse echoes his earlier words in Galatians 3:28, applying the unification found in Christ to the question of circumcision, which evidently was the subject of division in the Galatian community. Circumcision, here, carries a deeper significance than the mere act itself, as Cousar explains: "The terms refer not

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[35] Thomas H. Tobin, *Paul's Rhetoric in Its Contexts: The Argument of Romans* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 64.
[36] Galatians 6:15, NRSVue.

merely to the rite administered to male Jewish babies and to proselytes or the lack of the rite, but to the categories of people distinguished by it."[37] Paul is declaring that this division into two separate categories is no longer valid.

Galatians is not the only place Paul writes about circumcision. In the early chapters of his letter to the Romans, Paul sets forth a detailed argument about Jews, Gentiles, and the law. While fully examining the contours of his argument is beyond the scope of this study, a brief comparison of his words about circumcision is illuminating:

> So, if the uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? … For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not the written code. Such a person receives praise not from humans but from God.[38]

As is the case in Galatians, Paul is muddying the waters around what was previously seen as a clear-cut distinction between the circumcised and the uncircumcised. In these verses from Romans, Paul's emphasis is on faithful action in response to God's grace.[39] This external faithfulness demonstrates that a person is inwardly transformed, and therefore, "circumcision is a matter of the

[37] Charles B. Cousar, *Galatians*, *Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 155.
[38] Romans 2:26, 28-29, NRSVue.
[39] Paul Achtemeier, *Romans*, *Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1985), 52-53.

heart." Rather than external, physical features being the defining characteristic, Paul argues that one's inner reality, reflected in faithful action, is more important. A similar line of thought can be found in Galatians 5:6, where Paul writes, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love."[40] Once again, significance is placed on enacted faith rather than external markers of identity.

Can Paul's treatment of the distinction between Jews and Gentiles shed light on the significance of the male/female distinction as well? Granted, these are different phenomena, and we must be careful not to draw the parallel too far. However, linked as these subjects are in Galatians 3:28, Paul's treatment of Jewish identity, particularly as it relates to circumcision, can provide an interesting parallel for the understanding of gender. When it comes to circumcision, Paul's emphasis is not on the physical, external characteristics of people's bodies—specifically, their genitals—but on an inward reality. It is "a matter of the heart." Does this not echo the witness of many transgender people today who describe an internal reality that transcends the meaning assigned to their physical bodies? Furthermore, Paul resists viewing circumcision as a static, inherent marker of identity, emphasizing instead the faithful action that

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[40] Galatians 5:6, NRSVue.

corresponds to it, "faith working through love." Does this not echo the arguments of contemporary queer theorists who understand gender not as a person's static, inherent identity, but rather as an identity that is constructed through its repeated performance?[41] Paul's poetic claim in Galatians 3:28 that there is no longer "Jew or Greek" is nestled within his much larger argument about Jews, Gentiles, the law, and circumcision, an argument he approaches from many angles. Particularly in his writings about circumcision, however, Paul provides an impassioned argument that turns attention away from physical characteristics and toward inward reality and its external enactment. While his subject matter is clearly the meaning of circumcision for Jews and Gentiles, Paul's words provide an alluring resource for people seeking to understand gender in similar ways. Just as there is no "Jew" and "Greek," there is also no "male" and "female."

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS: CHURCH LIFE WITHOUT "MALE AND FEMALE"

If it is indeed the case that in Christ other differentiating factors are transcended and even rendered insignificant, then this has profound

[41] A fuller discussion can be found in Chapter One of this thesis. As Judith Butler wrote, "what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts." In Butler, xv.

implications for how churches operate.[42] A guiding question in applying Galatians 3:28 is this: where do church policies, practices, facilities, and liturgy maintain and reinforce a gender dichotomy of male and female? If Galatians 3:28 shows that these differences have been overcome in Christ, then how can a church ensure that its practices do not unintentionally reinstitute those very divisions? Although history contains examples to the contrary, churches today would find it abhorrent to designate separate seating areas for slave and free or to segregate people based on the religion or ethnicity of their birth. Yet when it comes to the third pair of terms in Galatians 3:28, male and female, many churches retain a host of divisions based on gender. Is this in keeping with Paul's radical words? To be sure, the churches of Paul's day also retained gender differences, as did the surrounding culture. They also retained the existence of slavery. And yet, we have seen that Galatians 3:28 can be understood as a call to a different way of being. As one commentator points out, Paul "sees the church as an alternative community that prefigures the new creation in the midst of a

[42] To be sure, local church polity is varied and complex. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, my primary focus is on the churches from my own context, which is that of moderate/progressive Baptist congregations in the United States. Even as I hope these observations may be applicable more widely, it is to this context in particular that I offer this discussion on policy and practice, exploring how the vision of unity in Christ is implemented.

world that continues to resist God's justice."[43] For churches seeking to embody this alternative community, Galatians 3:28 serves as a call toward equality and a new identity in Christ—a new identity with practical ramifications. Let us consider, then, several areas in which attention can be taken to avoid reimposing the gender divisions that have been overcome in Christ.

One important aspect of church life to examine is the liturgy and worship practices of a congregation. Language that presupposes a gender binary can appear in many forms during worship. At times these may appear in the informal, unscripted parts of worship, such as when a leader might say, "Good morning, boys and girls," during a time with children. While these expressions of the gender binary are relatively easy to adjust, other elements are more entrenched. Hymn lyrics, for instance, are often deeply beloved and held in memory, yet they may retain elements that are problematic. For instance, many older hymns refer to "man" or "mankind" when discussing humanity as a whole. Many newer hymns are careful to ensure that masculine language does not predominate. And yet, in their attempt to express the inclusion of both men and women, some newer language inadvertently reinforces a binary of "brothers

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[43] Richard B. Hays, "The Letter to the Galatians," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. XI (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 272.

and sisters," "mothers and fathers," "women and men," and the like. For those whose gender identity falls outside the binary, this language, intended as inclusive, turns out to be exclusive. This challenge also comes to the fore in the Scriptural text, specifically in its language for humanity. Many of Paul's letters include an address to ἀδελφοὶ, "brothers,"[44] presumably implying the entire Christian community. The NRSVue translation uses "brothers and sisters" in an attempt to convey that Paul is not exclusively addressing men, yet this linguistic choice is one that reinforces a gender binary. Although these challenges are not easily solved, worship leaders may opt at times to use alternative terms, such as "people of God," "beloved," "siblings," "family of God," or "friends." Utilizing only language of brothers and sisters excludes those who do not identify with either category, so more inclusive language is needed. Finally, worship leaders also do well to be attentive to whose voices and stories are presented in worship, ensuring that diverse gender representations are given voice in the worshiping life of the community.

A second area to consider has to do with the church's facilities. In particular, bathrooms are an important point of discussion in churches, as in the rest of society, because they remain one of the few spaces designated specifically

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[44] For instance, in Galatians 3:15.

for one gender or another. While this is a highly contentious political debate when it comes to the bathroom policies of public schools, for churches this can be framed as a question of both justice and hospitality: when people come to our church, do they have a place to safely and comfortably use the restroom? Even as the broader conversations about best practices continue to evolve, a helpful step for churches is making sure there is at least one bathroom that is open to any gender. Having a single-stall restroom designated for this purpose is inclusive of those outside the binary, while also being a considerate option for families or for anyone who prefers more privacy than a shared, public restroom provides. If such a bathroom is available, it is important that signage be in place informing guests of its existence, particularly if it is located away from more a prominent "men's room" and "women's room." Signs can be a powerful source of welcome for those attempting to navigate an unfamiliar space. Even beyond the question of bathrooms, signage and website language provide a place where affirming churches can communicate clearly their inclusive stance toward gender-expansive people. Given the rejection that LGBTQ+ people have historically received from communities of faith, a stance of inclusivity may not be assumed unless such a welcome is explicitly stated.

Third, churches seeking to embody the inclusiveness of Galatians 3:28 can examine their formal policies and procedures, such as the language on forms and policy documents. For instance, does a new member form have a box to check for "male" or "female"? Does the wedding policy describe a bride and groom? One place this can become particularly challenging has to do with policies for the protection of youth and children. For example, are there rules for youth trips that designate sleeping arrangements and chaperone requirements based on the gender of participants? Such rules serve several purposes: keeping children safe, ensuring adequate supervision, and guarding against liability. While many places are now rethinking whether their current policies need to be updated, it is important that any new policies continue to meet the valuable objectives of providing necessary protection—yet without assuming heteronormativity and binary gender identities that do not align with the reality of people's lives. There is no simple solution here. Even this difficulty, however, may reveal that older protection policies based merely on gender separation did not provide as much oversight as may have been hoped. New policies will need to be developed with nuance and care.

Finally, it is also important for congregations to look with fresh eyes at the various practices of their church. For example, do nametags, staff email

signatures, and the church website list pronouns alongside people's names? At a programmatic level, does the church provide opportunities that are largely based on gender, such as a men's Bible study or a women's missions circle? Churches may well decide to retain some groups like these, but it is important to discuss whether too many such distinctions limit the participation of nonbinary people and whether these groups' continuation implies something about the legitimacy of gender differences. Because a church's practices communicate so much about its beliefs, it is worth thinking carefully about what these practices, formal and informal, may be communicating. If in Christ there is no male and female, does it make sense to preserve these categories in the life of Christ's church?

DIFFERENCE AND UNITY: DISAGREEING WELL

To be sure, the practical implications outlined above will not all be easy to discuss, let alone implement. Even broaching issues of gender and sexuality can be profoundly challenging. As divisive as these issues have become in contemporary American society, there is significant potential for conflict and division when discussing these matters. Navigating these waters requires thoughtfulness, humility, and a commitment to listen well to one another. Even when disagreeing, people can treat one another with respect and Christian love.

As David Gushee implores of people whose theology does not allow them to be fully affirming of LGBT people, "If this is where you get off the bus, please go with a new sense of resolve to love and serve LGBT people and to make your family, friendship group, and church a safe and loving place for everyone—and to resist the easier path of silence or indifference."[45] Acting in love is the moral baseline required of all, even in the face of stark disagreement.

After all, division and conflict are nothing new.[46] This was certainly the case in the Galatian church. Galatians 3:28 lists several categories with the potential to be dividing lines in humanity, asserting that unity can nevertheless be found. As Fiorenza puts it, Paul extols "the oneness of the body of Christ, the church, where all social, cultural, religious, national, and biological gender divisions and differences are overcome."[47] In Galatians, Paul does not explain precisely what he means by the phrase "in Christ Jesus," but his letters contain frequent imagery of the church depicted as the body of Christ. In fact, Furnish insightfully observes that when 1 Corinthians includes a verse parallel to Galatians 3:28, it is precisely in the context of describing diversity within the

[45] David Gushee, *Changing Our Mind*, 2nd ed. (Canton, MI: Read the Spirit Books, 2015), 47.
[46] Paul's letters are filled with his advice about specific conflicts taking place in various Christian communities, as well as his words about how to relate well to one another. See, for instance, the gracious and tolerant words of Romans 14-15.
[47] Fiorenza, 218.

body of Christ.[48] This passage reads, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."[49] Through the metaphor of one body with many members that each have a different function, Paul's writings show that sameness and uniformity are not necessary for unity, nor are they descriptive of diverse Christian individuals and communities.

When it comes to navigating the reality of those different members, contemporary church leaders may find it helpful to draw on the insights of polarity management.[50] This framework suggests that all organizations maintain a balance of various concepts, including diversity and unity. These two concepts—or simply "difference" and "sameness"—can be understood as connected poles, each of which has advantages and disadvantages for a congregation. On the "diversity" side, some churches pride themselves on providing a big tent, making space for a wide range of perspectives to come

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[48] Furnish, 93.

[49] 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, NRSVue.

[50] For one perspective on understanding polarities, see Barry Johnson, *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems* (Amherst, MA: HRD Press, 2014).

together in community. On the “unity” side, some congregations experience a high degree of shared beliefs and values, enabling them to speak clearly with one voice. Both options have advantages and disadvantages. Churches emphasizing diversity may be viewed positively as gracious, understanding, humble, and inclusive. Yet they may also be criticized as wishy-washy, lukewarm, spineless, directionless, or silent in the face of evil. On the other hand, churches leaning toward unity may be positively seen as principled, bold, united, clear, and absolute. Yet they may be criticized as strident, self-righteous, conformist, and rigid.

Is one approach better than the other? Is there a way to do both? There is no simple answer to this, and different individuals and congregations may hold a different space along that polarity. Some seasons may call for a more tolerant approach, while other seasons may call for like-mindedness. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for instance, had little patience for the accommodationist tendencies of German churches as Nazis rose to power, so his position spoke clearly of what was right and what was wrong.[51] On the other hand, some churches today find it incredibly meaningful to hold space for people with diverse perspectives to

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[51] See, for instance, the stark clarity of his writing about the demands of Christian obedience and the cost of discipleship in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

worship together, particularly in an increasingly polarized society with fewer and fewer opportunities for such relationships to develop. They embrace ideological diversity and shun calls for uniformity.

These dynamics can be seen clearly in the ways churches respond to questions of gender and sexuality, a frequent point of contention in many churches. Congregations that tend toward diversity, seeking a middle ground on these issues and "agreeing to disagree," may provide more room for people who are new to these subjects, patiently meeting them where they are and helping them to take the next steps in their growth. Their diversity provides opportunities for people to learn from one another. Yet their lack of a decisive affirming stance may lead LGBTQ+ people to keep their distance, knowing that they may not be welcomed and safe in those spaces. On the other hand, churches with a more unified message face their own drawbacks. Whether united in opposition to LGBTQ+ issues or united in affirmation and welcome of LGBTQ+ people, these churches may find themselves limited by the constraints of their agreement. Both people who disagree and people who are unsure what to think may find no room in such an environment.

How should churches proceed? This is one place where we do well to return to Paul's words about the body of Christ having many members. Some

congregations and some individuals may find themselves called to a patient, accommodating stance, meeting people where they are and making room for diverse perspectives to learn and grow. There is good work to be done here. Others may feel compelled to take a decisive stand, noting that when human beings are being marginalized, excluded, and oppressed, patience comes at the expense of justice. This is also important work. These approaches are different and may conflict with one another at times, as people disagree and debate which course of action is appropriate in a particular time and place. These debates, too, are important. And yet, even when churches and churchgoers disagree with one another and the path ahead is unclear, wisdom and hope can be found in Paul's words of oneness in the body of Christ. If divisions as seemingly entrenched and significant as those in Galatians 3:28—Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female—are overcome, then surely ideological disagreements pale in comparison to the unity that is found when all are one in Christ Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Galatians 3:28 is a rich text that evades easy explanation, yet its message of oneness provides an important voice in contemporary conversations about gender. As we have seen, while this verse can be heard as a call for equality

between genders, it can also be understood more radically as undercutting the binary conception of gender entirely. At the very least, this verse calls into question the significance of these categories in the body of Christ, where all are made one. Such an understanding challenges congregations to examine their practices with fresh eyes, asking whether they are reimposing divisions that have already been overcome. At the same time, this verse also provides a word of hope to congregations seeking to navigate difference and ideological conflict, for all human divisions are overshadowed by the oneness that is found in Christ. In all of these ways, Galatians 3:28 provides a valuable site for congregations to study, learn, and grow together, seeking to live faithfully in the reality of the new creation that is evoked by its poetic words.

Conclusion

When undertaking to write this thesis, I expected an uphill climb to reconcile contemporary understandings of gender with the traditional perspective found in the Bible. Yet over the course of researching and writing this thesis, I discovered that the two poles I had imagined are actually not two competing, oppositional perspectives. In reality, just as contemporary perspectives on gender vary widely, so too does the material found in the Bible. While the Bible has relatively little to say about gender identity, what it does say—such as its treatment of eunuchs—is complex and spacious. The words of Scripture do not stand in opposition to views of gender outside a fixed binary. Rather, both Scripture and contemporary conversations seek to make sense of a world that is complex, including in matters of gender. Holding the two together makes for a rich conversation—and a vital one.

Over the course of studying this material, I have been reminded time and time again that this is not an abstract, hypothetical issue. I have encountered and learned from transgender and nonbinary Christians who have long been wrestling with these questions in beautiful ways. Additionally, in conversations with people in faith communities, I have found that even though these concepts

are frequently associated with young people, people of all ages have a personal interest in these questions—not just for understanding their children and grandchildren, but also themselves.

To be sure, things have been changing rapidly, and not everyone agrees with the developments taking place. It has been humbling to recognize that no argument of mine will convince everyone to accept gender beyond a male-female binary. Some individuals and congregations will continue to read the Bible in ways that reinforce a rigid gender binary and refuse to admit any further complexity as compatible with the Christian faith. Not all faith communities will embrace gender-expansive people. But some will. Some churches and individuals are courageously stepping out into unfamiliar territory with an open mind, seeking to understand their neighbors and themselves in ways they had not considered before. Understandably, arriving at a new way of viewing gender can be a disorienting process, and it is into this complexity that I offer this thesis in the hope of providing some insight and reassurance.

Navigating this terrain requires cultivating a new perspective on the world. It involves unlearning certain assumptions, conscious and unconscious, about the nature of gender, and it requires learning a new vocabulary for concepts that are unfamiliar. Such a task may seem daunting for individuals and

congregations that seek to travel this path. Fortunately, these learners are blessed with many excellent teachers who are available to show the way. Some of these teachers are nonbinary and transgender authors whose writings help provide clarity and insight about matters of gender.[1] Equally important are the people in our local communities whose life experience should be heard and honored. Dr. Roberto Che Espinoza describes this emphasis on embodied relationships rather than abstract ideas as being "committed to doing relational work in the face of oppositional politics."[2] It is critical to listen well to these voices.

As we have seen in this thesis, however, contemporary voices are not the only teachers available to us. My hope in the preceding chapters has been to highlight how the Bible can be a teacher for contemporary people seeking to understand gender in more expansive ways. Gender has been part of the human experience since the beginning, and the Bible records some of the complex ways that people of faith have sought to understand and respond that that reality. These voices are complex and not always easy to understand. And yet, when we listen well to these ancient voices, we find another resource that sheds light on

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[1] In the present work, I have been particularly grateful for the writings of Austen Hartke, Justin Sabia-Tanis, and Virginia Mollenkott.

[2] Roberto Che Espinoza, *Body Becoming: A Path to Our Liberation* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022), 173.

how gender can be understood. These teachers help us to see the world in a new way.

The creation narratives in Genesis teach us how to see beyond a binary. In the created pairs found in each day of creation of Genesis 1, we find examples of concepts that make sense of the world without confining creation to its simplified presentation. Recognizing how the rich diversity of creation overflows simplistic categorization, we gain an appreciation for the concepts of male and female as descriptive of much of human experience, yet we also understand that not everything needs to be neatly confined to these categories. Even the grammar of Genesis provides a spacious ambiguity that evades any attempts at claiming absolute knowledge and stifling the mystery of God. After all, it in the image of this wondrous, uncontainable God that humanity is created.

Gregory of Nyssa teaches us to see beyond the present. The expansive scope of his focus as he reads Scripture—conceptualizing an original humanity prior to the establishment of gender and imagining the eschatological form of the soul in the resurrection—provides a stark contrast to any perspective that focuses only on the present, physical form of human bodies. Viewed from this broad perspective, the significance of the current anatomical form begins to loosen its grip, and new possibilities begin to emerge. Gregory of Nyssa's voice also serves

as a reminder that no matter how timely contemporary discussions of gender identity may seem, these questions are not new. There have always been people whose experience of gender is more complex than a simple, fixed binary, and we do well to listen to the voices of those who have come before.

The Bible's description of eunuchs teaches us to see beyond traditional practices and rigid beliefs. Within the pages of the Bible, we find several different perspectives on eunuchs and their place within the religious community. In the Hebrew Bible, one voice insists on clear boundaries that exclude eunuchs' participation in the community, while another voice heralds God's promise that one day they will find a place. In the New Testament, the voice of Jesus adds complexity and honors difference, while the book of Acts narrates the tangible welcome of an Ethiopian eunuch into the Christian faith. Taken together, these voices demonstrate how perspectives can grow and evolve over time, marking a trajectory toward inclusion, even as room is held for all of the voices to speak.

Finally, the witness of Galatians 3:28 teaches us to see beyond all surface-level distinctions. The identity found in the new creation in Christ overshadows even those external differences that may seem foundational, unquestioned, and absolute. Paul points beyond apparent external markers of identity to the inner spiritual reality that is then enacted in the life of faith. For people seeking to

understand gender beyond a simple, physically-determined binary, Galatians 3:28 shows a better way. Such a shift has practical ramifications in the life of the Christian community, which must think through how its traditional practices and teachings may erroneously reinforce the very gender division that has been overcome in Christ. Even when such work is difficult and potentially divisive, however, Galatians gives hope that no divisions are more powerful than the oneness of the new creation in Jesus Christ.

Does this settle the matter? Do these insights answer all of our questions about gender and how to approach these topics in congregational life? Of course not. There remains much more to learn, and the subject itself continues to evolve as understandings of human gender continue to grow and develop. Even when the work is challenging, however, it is crucial that we have these conversations as people of faith. My hope in this thesis is to help people of faith to know that we can walk into these conversations with confidence, for we do not do so alone. With ancient, sacred voices serving as our conversation partners, we can walk forward together and learn from one another, led by the Spirit of God.

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Biography

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