



This Cultural Moment

Genesis 1:26-28

In the Sermon Series

God's Design, Our Bodies, and this Cultural Moment

Rev. Dr. Jason Carter

This Cultural Moment | Gen. 1:26-28

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We are living in a complex world as Bible-believing Christians. We are living in a cultural moment where “everything is political” and where “sex has become politicized”. How do we respond? The first option is to be an **OSTRICH**: stick your head in the sand, pretend that no one is talking about these issues of gender and sexuality (and never – absolutely never – talk about them in the church!)

Be an Ostrich! The only problem is that you end up surrendering the moral and ethical imperatives of the gospel. Should the church **abandon** the realm of ethics or **surrender** its moral voice simply due to the cultural pressures of our age? Or, is the gospel always counter-cultural?

The second option is to be an **ELEPHANT** or be a **DONKEY**. That is, you look at all the moral and ethical issues not (primarily) through the lens of the Bible but (primarily) through the lens of a particular political party. The only problem is the truism that you may have heard: “What happens when you mix religion and politics? Politics.” The problem with this stance is that the political party begins (slowly at first, more aggressively later) to wag the tail of the Bible & the church & the church’s leaders. Slowly, the Bible begins to lose its prophet voice; allegiance to the Bible – *sola scriptura* (the great Reformation doctrine, *Scripture alone*) – begins to erode; and you begin to find yourself becoming **way more excited to live in the world of politics** than to find yourself in the great story of redemption as found in the Bible.

Third way is to be an **OWL**. Wise and winsome – and primarily a Christian – as you approach this cultural moment.

Opening Framework about how we should be talking about issues of gender & sexuality

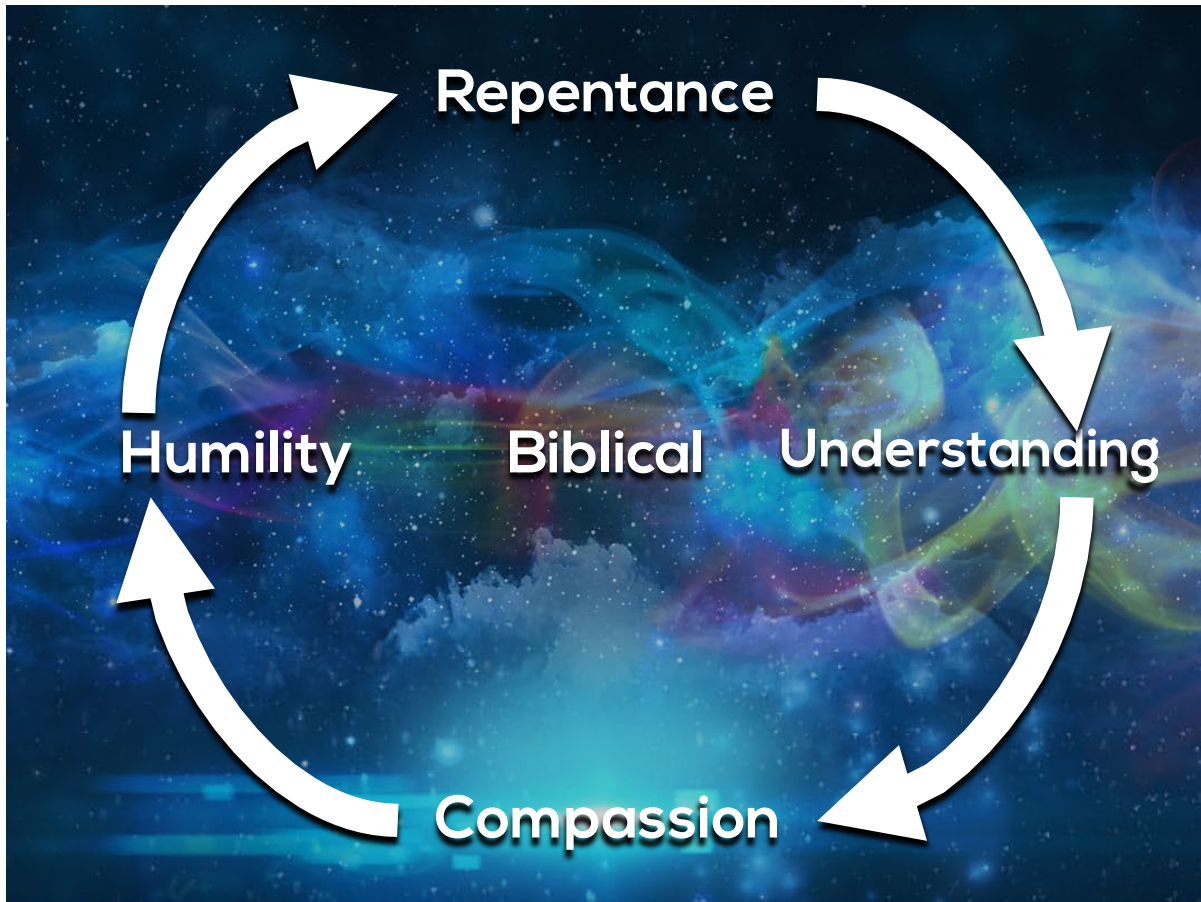
Pastor-Counselor vs Pastor Theologian. How can we think about cultural engagement in today’s world?

- 1. Repentance.** As the big C church, we own up to our past. Where the church has been quick to condemn and slow to listen – we repent. Where sexual sin has been raised up out of proportion to other sins -- we repent. Where sexual sin has been (implicitly) taught to be the unforgiveable sin in the Church – we repent. Where slander against homosexuals or transgender people occurs in our hearts or in the heart of the church – we repent. Repentance is our first word in this conversation.
- 2. Understanding.** We want to acknowledge that a struggle is occurring esp. amongst younger generations. Real struggles. And real questions. “Gender dysphoria refers to the psychological distress wherein someone does not identify with the biological sex of their body.” We don’t want to push those struggles to the dark places of the internet but be a place where silent struggles are brought out into the light in order to experience God’s healing.
- 3. Compassion.** We want to model a posture of compassion. Always. On all issues. Sexual struggles are present within every church and within many Christian families. And we want to react not in a confused ways or surprised ways but (as parents, as pastors, as friends, as grandparents) respond in compassionate and curious ways as we seek to point people to the love and grace of God.
- 4. Humility.** From the outset we acknowledge: “We are all sexually broken people” – singles, teenagers, older people, married people and everybody in between. 1 Peter 4:17: “For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God”. It is not only the Catholic Church with its priests. Protestants & Evangelicals: we

have our Ravi Zacharias and our Carl Lentz. The Southern Baptist Convention released a sad report three weeks ago about sexual abuse within the largest Protestant denomination in America.

It's all very sad. *We are all sexually broken people*, and the quicker we come to the table owning our brokenness, the quicker we come to the table to receive the grace of God.

5. **Biblical.** We want to simply ask: *What does the Bible say?* What does the Bible say about gender? What about the new sexual revolution of LGBTQ+? Does the Church still look to the Bible for its moral authority? *I believe it does.* Does the Bible still speak with ethical clarity issues of sexuality and gender? *I believe it does.*



And so, as we have this conversation, our conversation will be humble, full of repentance, seeking understanding of one another with respectful tones, showing compassion, and standing with two feet solidly upon the Bible. What I'm really talking about is our cultural engagement – the way we engage the culture. As Christians, how do we talk about *what everyone is talking about* but **in a way** and **with a posture** and **with a tone** that no one is modeling in our larger culture?

And what do we need to do that? We need a strong community!

“In this era of divisiveness, the church must model a strong community where traits like acceptance, empathy, and listening are the norm within a culture that has forgotten what those traits really mean. This community must be built on love, where transparent dialogue about difficult issues can legitimately take place. Truth-telling in our era is increasingly becoming difficult and even costly to personal relationships. [Friends] This need not be the case [in the church]. Where true Christian community is

practiced, such conversations can strengthen relationships and sharpen the body of Christ instead of dividing it (like what happens in the world).”¹

We all know these conversations are not happening in a healthy way in the world. *If not in the church, then where?*

Why? Why now? Why have the conversation at all?

1. **Relevant for our Times.** *I already know you are talking about these issues.* People of all ages have asked me about these things -- literally people from 14 to 80. People in our church have written me emails and engaged me in conversations. *These questions are on people's minds.*
2. **Biblical Worldview.** We want to be a church that engages the culture with a biblical worldview. We want to be a place that equips you to hold and to embrace a biblical worldview in the midst of seismic cultural change. We want to be that kind of church!
3. **Our Faith is a Public Faith.** We are ambassadors. We are witnesses. And hence we live out our faith in the public square. Christians have never had a privatized faith in 2000 years of church history. It has never been an option.
4. **The Accelerated Pace of the New Sexual and Moral Revolution.** It's underfoot. It's accelerating. Only ostriches can pretend it's not happening.

Apologetics used to be about explaining the Christian faith to an unbelieving world. Apologetics is now **also** about explaining the world to the church. How did we get to the point that claims to moral truth are now embedded in emotional preferences? That's worth thinking about b/c it gets at the very fabric of this new moral and sexual revolution.

5. **God's Truth Always Builds Up.** This sermon series will not primarily be one long lament or one big polemic. We do not want to simply whine about times gone by when **times** were better or the **culture** was purer or when the **church** was more respected. We want to engage positively with the question: *what does it mean to be a gendered image bearer created in the image of God?*



¹ Jason Carter, God's Design, Our Bodies, and this Cultural Moment, 5-Session Discussion Guide interacting with *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to the Sexual Revolution* by Carl Trueman, 19.

And so, for the next two weeks, there will be, in fact, very little polemic. Because I will be talking about biblical masculinity and biblical femininity but in ways that get beyond the typical discussion about “roles” in the church.

We should be deeply interested in asking the question: If God is a relational God, and if he created us as relational beings as male and female – then what does it mean to embrace being a **deeply masculine man** and a **deeply feminine woman** – gendered image bearers as a reflection of God? That is worth thinking about!

Three Biblical Snapshots – How NOT to do Cultural Engagement

How do we engage the Bible & how do we engage the culture? Especially in this moment, when it’s often been said, “Everything is political”. I decry that. You decry that. But that is the hand we have been dealt and those are the cards that we hold in this era. And so let me give you three examples of what NOT to do:

1. **First Biblical Snapshot: 8th century bc – Isaiah the Prophet.** Isaiah 61. God says: **“For I the Lord love justice.”** Bind up the brokenhearted. Liberty to the captives. Isaiah condemns the oppression of the foreigner, the oppression of the poor and oppression of the marginalized. Full stop. Without an apology. And you, if you lay down over this text, a modern American political binary, you might say: *“Oh, that sounds progressive, Isaiah the prophet! That sounds like social justice.”*

No, my friends! It is **biblical** justice and it’s a huge category of the prophet. Do not lay a modern American political binary over the Bible.

2. **Second Biblical Snapshot:** Fast forward to the first century. A conversation occurs between **Jesus and Nicodemus.** John chapter 3. Jesus tells Nicodemus: **“You must be born again.”** And if you lay a modern American political binary over this text, you might be tempted to say: *“Well, does that mean that Jesus supported the moral majority of the late 20th century? That sounds very conservative.”*

No, my friends! It’s simply the doctrine of **regeneration**, a huge category of biblical salvation. Do not lay a modern American political binary over the texts of scripture. You will always muzzle the scriptures if you do.

3. **Third Biblical Snapshot:** Fast Forward to the apostle Paul. Galatians 3:28:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

“Is Paul saying that there must be racial unity in the body of Christ b/c Christ’s salvation has come for all? That sounds progressive. Paul must be in my camp.”

But then I would turn to Romans chapter 1, where the apostle Paul, equally inspired by God, equally writing the words of God: **“For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature...and men likewise...were consumed with passion for one another...receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error...God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.”** (Rom. 1:26-28).

“Are you saying Paul considers homosexuality a sin? That sounds conservative. Paul must be in my camp.”

And so, when I say: “We are not a red church. We are not a blue church. We are a Jesus church.” What I’m **also** really saying to you is this: *you have to give up reading the Bible through a **very narrow and recently modern and uniquely American** political binary (right and left, republican and democrat, red and blue).* Because if you don’t give up this way of reading the Bible and this way of living out your faith – then you are falling into the trap of political idolatry.



Because every time you put politics over the Bible – You are a political idolater.

Every time you put politics over the faith – You are a political idolater.

And this political idolatry in our era is happening on both the right and the left. Be careful!

JESUS & DIVISIVE POLITICS

Let me further illustrate this point by asking the controversial and polemical question: was Jesus a democrat or a republican?

“But Pastor.... You just told us.... not to transpose a **very narrow and recently modern and uniquely American** political binary over the Bible. Why would we do that to Jesus?” And I would say to you: “Very good point.”

At the same time, Jesus lived & moved in a first century Palestine that was rife with political controversies. And these political factions in Jesus’ days were just as contentious (if not more so) and just as divisive (if not more so) as our modern cultural moment.

There were, by my count, six distinct factions and six distinct parties in Jesus' day.²

(You think two warring factions is bad...triple that for the first century!!)

1. The **Sadducees** were the wealthy, land-owning elites who controlled the Temple. The priests and the high priests typically came from the Sadducees.
2. The **Pharisees** were middle class movement, popular with the masses who sought to be the arbiters of the OT law.
3. The **Essenes** were third party who believed that the Jewish government was hopelessly and irredeemably corrupt and eventually withdrew into the wilderness to wait for the end of the world. The community at Qumran who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls were Essenes.
4. The **Zealots** were like the Pharisees religiously but they were nationalists who resisted Roman rule even to the point of armed insurrection as embodied by the Maccabees who sought to overthrow Roman rule by violence.
5. The **Herodians** were a political group that owed its authority from King Herod, favored Greek customs and (unlike the Zealots) were committed to maintaining peace and the status quo – law and order - under Herodian rule.
6. The **Scribes** were the lawyers and teachers under the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin which was the Jewish council controlled by the Sadducees.

And so I ask you a very important question....which political party captured Jesus' heart in the first century? To what political party did Jesus regularly write blank checks of affection? When did Jesus put obedience to the scriptures lower than his political inclinations? The answer is NEVER!

Rather, he blasted: The **Sadducees** for not believing in the resurrection, for lining their own pockets at the expense of the poor. When Jesus cleansed the temple of moneychangers, it would have been the Sadducees who suffered financial loss that day.

He blasted the **Pharisees** and the **Scribes** for being hypocrites: "You brood of vipers." You lay heavy burdens on the people that you yourself never fulfill.

He blasted the **Herodians**. Publically, everyone knew that Herod and John the Baptist were mired controversy. John the Baptist had called out Herod for unlawfully taking his sister in law after divorcing his first wife. So Jesus weighs in: "Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist". Controversial? You bet!

He blasted the **Zealots** and their nationalistic aspirations. *Turn the other cheek. Peter, put away your sword.* The Kingdom of God is at hand, but it never comes about through violence.

² Big assist with this section from John Favalessa, "Was Jesus a Democrat or a Republican?", Nov. 21, 2018: <https://www.presby-newhall.org/theology/was-jesus-a-democrat-or-a-republican/>.

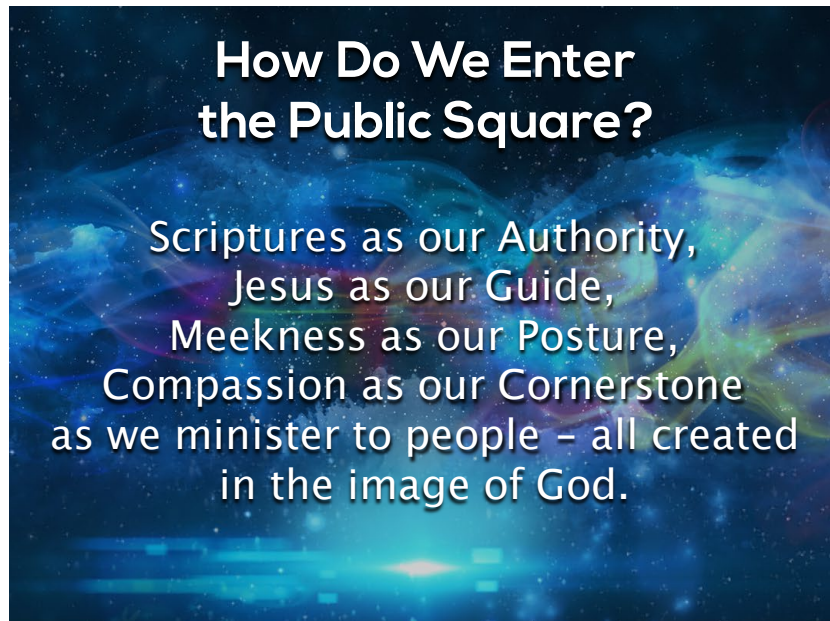
He blasted the **Essences**. (Nah, he didn't really...because they don't even appear in gospels!) But Jesus did say things like: *You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth.* Jesus sent his disciples into the world, not to withdraw into the wilderness at Qumran.

And so in life and ministry of Jesus, we have Jesus *opposing wealthy, landed-owning elites*. We have Jesus *opposing middle class populism*. We have Jesus *opposing nationalistic and armed insurrectionists*. And Jesus equally *opposing those who would settle for a peaceful and law and order status quo*. Jesus did not fit into the **any** of the major political parties of his day.

And so I ask you to think very carefully: What does that tell you about this cultural moment? In the very least, it requires you to think carefully, think biblically, and think in ways that are Jesus-centered as we respond to this cultural moment.

How do we enter the public square? How do we do cultural engagement?

Scriptures as our Authority, Jesus as our Guide, Meekness as our Posture, Compassion as our Cornerstone as we minister to people – all created in the image of God.



This is not to say that Christians should withdraw from the public square. This is not to say that Christians should abandon addressing issues of ethics and morality in our society. Jesus himself debated issues in the public square! This is not to say that Christians cannot come to firm conclusions about a particular form of government (big government vs. small government) and what best serves the interests of society.

It is, however, to warn us that *as Christians* we should not have politics wagging the tail of following Jesus.

5 Features of the Early Church – Countercultural & Attractive

I've given you three snapshots of Scripture. I've given you an overview of Jesus' engagement with the political divisiveness in his day. Well, now let's go from Jesus to the early church. How did the early church go from 11 apostles and Paul to conquering culturally and socially and ethically virtually the entire Mediterranean world? This transformation happened within a Roman Empire that was hostile to Christianity, persecuted Christianity, and propagated moral and sexual ethics that were vastly different than the church!

Dr. Larry Hurtado, one of the foremost scholars of Christians Origins and the Early Church – distinguished professor at the University of Edinburgh – identifies five key features of the early church that were – curiously and interestingly – both *supremely attractive* to the Roman world and *deeply counter-cultural* all at the same time!³

Moderns think that relevance makes Christianity attractive. What the early church experienced was that being countercultural, especially over and against a culture that was deeply flawed and deeply fallen, was itself supremely attractive.

For the first 400 years of its existence: Five unique features gave the early church such a solid identity *that the Roman Empire was wooed and wowed by Christ*. What were they?

1. The Early church was a multi-racial & multi-ethnic community, experiencing a unity across ethnic boundaries that was startling and astonishing.

- a. Read Acts 13:1-2. The church in Antioch: Barnabas – Jewish background. Simeon from Niger (country adjacent to Africa Niger River) probably black. Lucius of Cyrene was from North Africa, west of Egypt. Manean was the foster brother of Herod the Tetrarch who beheaded John the Baptist. Not only Jews and Gentiles, but different cultures, different classes, different linguistic backgrounds all ministering together. **This was astonishing** because it presented a “radical challenge to the entrenched social structure and divisions of Roman society”.⁴
Countercultural and so attractive to so many.

2. The Early Church was highly committed to care for the poor and marginalized by practicing hospitality.

- a. The Roman Empire expected you to care for your own family and own tribe. Yet, Christians were countercultural in that they helped everyone. They practiced justice everywhere.
- b. During the urban plagues of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, Christians stood out! One 2nd century plague lasted 19 years and killed 5 million people. The Bishop of Alexandria wrote this about Christians in the 3rd century:
 - Most of our brother-Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves...Heedless of the danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pain.⁵
- c. When Romans fled the cities, Christians stayed, Christians cared, and Christians showed compassion to all the poor, to all the suffering, and to all the diseased. *It was a hospitality that won over the Roman world.*

3. The Early Church lived out a strong sexual counterculture over and against widely acceptable sexual practices in the Roman Empire.

- a. What were those practices?

³ See Larry Hurtado, *Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries*, <https://www.amazon.com/Christian-Centuries-Marquette-Theology-Lecture/dp/1626005044/?tag=thegospcoal-20>; Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods: early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*, <https://www.amazon.com/Destroyer-gods-Early-Christian-Distinctiveness/dp/1481304739/?tag=thegospcoal-20>. Tim Keller, 5 Features that Made the Early Church Unique, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-features-early-church-unique/>.

⁴ See Keller, “5 Features that Made the Early Church Unique”.

⁵ See Peter Barnes, “Plagues Throughout Christian History and Some Christian Responses,” *Banner of Truth*, Oct. 23, 2020: <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2020/plagues-throughout-christian-history-and-some-christian-responses/>.

- b. (1) “Prostitution was ubiquitous and uncontroversial.” (2) The sexual exploitation of poor women and enslaved women was abetted by public institutions. (3) Slaves, prostitutes, and children (meaning boys) were viewed as “perfectly legitimate outlets for the male sexual desire”. If a man slept with prostitutes before marriage, he was still counted as a virgin. If during marriage, it was not considered adultery. One Christian bishop described Roman sexual policy as “forbidding adulteries, building brothels.”⁶
- c. The Christian sexual ethic was radically countercultural then...as it is now. Who were the winners of this Christian cultural revolution? Women, slaves, prostitutes, and young boys were all the big winners of a Christian sexual counterculture.⁷ *And it was so attractive to so many.*
- d. When the early church insisted – and kept insisting – that sex was reserved exclusively for marriage between one man and one woman, it was *completely subversive* and *yet completely liberating* because it was good and true and beautiful and according to God’s design.

4. Early church was a community strongly committed to the sacred nature of life and the protection of children against infanticide and abortion.

- a. The early church prioritized children. The early Christians rescued abandoned children. The early church placed children in Christian homes, including some with disabilities caused by unsuccessful abortions. According to the Twelve Tables of Romans Law, “deformed infants shall be killed” – infanticide. *Our own son Tristan with autism would have been killed under Roman law!* The widely circulated *Didache* (Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), which was used widely in the early church as a catechism all over the Mediterranean, world spoke directly against these Romans practices.⁸
- b. In sum, the church embodied a counter-cultural ethic against widely accepted practices backed by Roman law.

5. The Early Church was a peace-making community: committed to practicing forgiveness, peace-making, and a non-retaliatory posture.

- a. MLK and the Civil Rights movements has roots going back all the way to the early church.

And so it was these five identifying features – all together – that revolutionized and transformed the entire Roman Empire for the Cause of Christ. Now, I’ve just run quickly through four centuries – 400 years – of the early church. Countercultural in five major ways!

And some of you – I know what you were doing! Even though I just warned you against it, what were you doing? You were laying a **modern American political binary** over these issues. That is, you **agreed** with this one. You **disagreed** with that one. You **supported** this one. But you were **suspicious** of that one.

Why? Because the first two sound a bit progressive. The 3rd and 4th sound a bit conservative. The 5th: it doesn’t easily fall into the binary.

⁶ Big assist in this section from Kevin DeYoung, “The First Sexual Revolution: The Triumph of Christian Morality in the Roman Empire”, Sept. 9, 2019: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/first-sexual-revolution-triumph-christian-morality-roman-empire/> who is reviewing Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in late Antiquity*, <https://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0674660013/devorestandre-20>.

⁷ See DeYoung, “The First Sexual Revolution”.

⁸ For the early church’s stance on abortion, see “Respect for the Unborn Human Life: The Church’s Constant Teaching, <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/abortion/respect-for-unborn-human-life>. See Justin Taylor, “Did the Early Church Oppose Abortion?”, Nov. 29, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/did-the-early-church-oppose-abortion/>. See also Andy Naselli, “Abortion”, Jan. 26, 2009, <https://andynaselli.com/abortion>.

- (1) The Early Church was a multi-racial & multi-ethnic community, experiencing unity across ethnic boundaries that was startling and astonishing.
- (2) The Early Church was highly committed to care for the poor and marginalized by practicing hospitality.
- (3) The Early Church lived out a strong sexual counterculture over and against widely acceptable sexual practices in the Roman Empire.
- (4) The Early Church was a community strongly committed to the sacred nature of life and the protection of children against infanticide and abortion.
- (5) The Early Church was a peace-making community: committed to practicing forgiveness, peace-making, and a non-retaliatory posture.

MODERN SCENARIO

For instance, imagine me preaching in Birmingham Alabama (in the deep south) as guest preacher. And the pastor gives me the text: Galatians 3:28. “*Neither Jew or Gentile...we are all one in Christ Jesus.*” And as an illustration, I point to tenant #1 of the Early Church, namely that...

The Early church was multi-racial & multi-ethnic community, experiencing unity across ethnic boundaries that was startling and astonishing (and so attractive to so many) b/c it went against the structured divisions of Roman society.

After the church service, what happens? Some come up to me and say: “*Pastor, you are capitulating to woke ideology from the woke crowd. You are hopelessly progressive.*” Why? Because they are into shallow caricatures, branding the message through the lens of a **modern American political binary**. Their pastor, perhaps, never challenged them and never warned them about political idolatry. So they engage in it.

Yet, imagine with me another occasion. I’m preaching for a friend in New York City. They are going through the great Book of Romans. And he just happens to schedule a vacation right where Paul addresses the issue of homosexuality. (Because he’s a coward!) He has never warned and never challenged his people to not interpret the Scripture through the **modern American political binary**. And so I preach Paul. In the same way that Paul has been interpreted and preached for 2000 years. And in the same way that churches in Asia, Latin America, and Africa – these regions where Christianity is exploding – I preach the text in that same way, standing with all these nationalities and all these ethnicities within the global church. And what happens after the service? Well, I am called “*narrow, judgmental, bigoted and hopelessly conservative*”.

What is going on? You can get called a bigot for championing racial unity in the Deep South and you can get called a bigot for championing the historic Christian sexual ethic in the urban centers of our country.

There is always an offense to the gospel. The ethics downstream from the cross is always offensive.

The Genesis Blueprint – Made in the Image of God (Gen. 1:26-28)

God's defines what he designs.

Genesis paints a beautiful picture of creation – with creation of male and female as the finishing masterpieces of an extraordinary design – made with extra care, extra attention, and extra precision. Male & female made in the image of God.

Just as a plane's engine cannot independently decide to be a wheel because the engine has been designed for a specific purpose. So too, it is God who defines what he designs.

2nd Point of Genesis Blueprint: Your body is you and you are your body.

Curiously, this is the opposite of how we tend to think! Gen. 2:7 - *Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.*

We tend to think God made a soul; then the soul floats around in the heavens or the universe for a while; and then *later* God gives you a body!

If you've ever heard someone say: "You are my angel sent from heaven." "You came down from heaven to be my little child." That's actually not biblical!

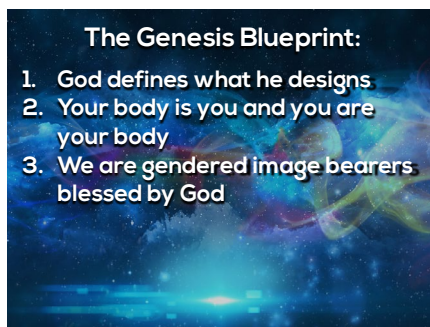
Because the first thing God does is makes a body and then he brings and breathes life to it.

"We are an animated body not an incarnated soul." That's very helpful! We are not a soul who just happens to have a body. But neither are we a body with no soul. Carl Trueman, "There is no I [without] the body. There is no US that exists independently of our flesh which is then randomly assigned to the bodies we have."⁹

No! Your body is you and you are your body. God's defines what he designs. Your body is an integral part of you, no one discards it to find an inner person that exists apart from the body.

3rd Point of the Genesis Blueprint: We are Gendered Image Bearers Blessed by God.

God blesses male. God blesses female. God gives them to one another.



Imagine a world where male and female are completely at ease with who they are, how they are made, and all the various particularities of their bodies. This is the Genesis Blueprint. Gen. 2:25: *The man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.*

So if God blesses male and female, that means that I called to embrace being **a deeply masculine man for the glory of God.** And my sisters in Christ are called to embrace **being deeply feminine women for the glory of God.**

And what that entails – in ways that goes beyond the stereotypes – are what we are talking about the next two weeks.

⁹ Big assist with point #1 & #2 from Jason McKnight's podcast, Encounter Grace, What God Thinks of Your Body.