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The Doctrine of Humankind



A THEOLOGY OF HUMAN EMBODIMENT

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“The Lord appeared to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of his tent during the heat of the day. He looked up, and he saw three men standing near him.”

(Genesis 18:1–2a)

I. INTRODUCTION

The narrative of Genesis 18 is intriguing for several reasons. It wonderfully presents an ancient cultural expression of hospitality (vv. 1–8). It provides choreographic details about the positioning of the Lord, Abraham, and Sarah as the first protagonist challenges the third protagonist about her denial of laughing at his (seemingly) ridiculous promise that she would bear a child in her old age (vv. 9–15). It recounts a daring conversation between the Lord and his covenant partner, Abraham, concerning the fate of desperately wicked people (vv. 16–33).

Our focus is another matter. Though the narrative characterizes the visitors as “three men” (vv. 2, 22), we readers know that one of the three is “the Lord” (e.g., vv. 1, 10, 17, 33). Furthermore, in the subsequent narrative, we learn that the other two visitors are actually “angels” (19:1, 12, 15). Strangely, then, these three “men” are actually a divine being and two angelic beings. As for the first strangeness, theologians use the term *theophany* or *Christophany*: a highly unusual appearance of God or, given the insistence of other biblical passages that “no one has ever seen God” (John 1:18),¹ more probably a pre-incarnate, temporary manifestation of God the Son.² As for the second

¹Other passages affirm that no one sees God: Exod 33:20; John 5:37; 6:46; Col 1:15; 1 Tim 6:16; 1 John 4:20.

²Vern S. Poythress, *A Biblical Theology of God’s Appearing* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018). For a

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strangeness, theologians employ the term *angelophany* and insist that angels are properly immaterial beings that can, on occasion, take on human shape and appear as “men.”³ Consequently, the narrative of Genesis 18 is strange because it features three beings—God (or the preincarnate Son) and two angels—who, though usually and properly immaterial, have taken on human-like physicality.

Does such strangeness pertain also to Abraham and Sarah? We readers give no second thought to these protagonists being embodied people, one a male embodied human being and the other a female embodied human being. They share every possible human characteristic with us readers, including embodiment. There is not one strange thing about these two characters. As far as I can recall, theologians never use the word *anthropophany*.

This point leads to the thesis of this article: embodiment is the proper state of human existence.⁴ Whereas God’s existence as embodied is strange, and whereas angels’ existence as embodied is strange, human existence as embodied is natural and normal. Indeed, God has designed and creates human beings to be embodied. This is the embodiment thesis.

II. EMBODIMENT: A DEFINITION⁵

In *Embodiment: A History*, Justin Smith defines “embodiment” as “having, being in, or being associated with a body.”⁶ Human nature is complex, consisting of both an immaterial aspect and a material aspect; so “the body is a biological, material entity.”⁷ There is a second definition of “embodiment.” As a discipline of study like biology and psychology, embodiment is “an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and the mode of presence and

counter argument to Christophanies, see Andrew S. Malone, *Knowing Jesus in the Old Testament?: A Fresh Look at Christophanies* (London: IVP UK, 2015).

³For further discussion, see Graham A. Cole, *Against the Darkness: The Doctrine of Angels, Satan, and Demons*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 76–78.

⁴This article is adapted from Gregg R. Allison, *Embodied: Living as Whole People in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming).

⁵The following discussion is taken from Gregg R. Allison, “Four Theses concerning Human Embodiment,” *SBJT* 23, no. 2 (2019): 157.

⁶Justin E. H. Smith, “Introduction,” in *Embodiment: A History*, ed. Justin E. H. Smith, Oxford Philosophical Concepts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

⁷Thomas J. Csordas, “Somatic Modes of Attention,” *Cultural Anthropology* 8, no. 2 (May 1993): 135.

engagement in the world.”⁸ From a theological perspective, human embodiment intersects with a host of other important theological concerns:⁹

(1) an understanding of God’s creation of human beings and his design for human flourishing (thus, the theology of creation); (2) the constitution of human nature (thus, theological anthropology); (3) the somatic effects of the fall and sin (thus, hamartiology); (4) the nature of the incarnation (thus, Christology); (5) the Holy Spirit’s indwelling of, and divine action through, redeemed human beings (thus, pneumatology and soteriology); (6) the strangeness of disembodiment in the intermediate state and the completion of God’s redemptive work through the general resurrection (thus, eschatology); (7) numerous contemporary moral and social issues such as heterosexuality and homosexuality, transgenderism and gender dysphoria, and body image and body modification; and (8) an exposé of the devastating impact of Gnosticism/neo-Gnosticism on the America society and church.¹⁰

⁸Csordas, “Somatic Modes,” 135.

⁹I am cheered by the growing literature on human embodiment from a biblical and theological perspective, the most recent of which is Timothy Tennent, *For the Body: Recovering a Theology of Gender, Sexuality, and the Human Body* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020). As a discipline of study, embodiment began with John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline, 1986, 2006). Others have continued to develop this field: Mary T. Prokes, *Toward a Theology of the Body* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); John B. Nelson, *Body Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992); idem, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978); Benedict Ashley, *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian* (Braintree, MA: The Pope John Center, 1985); Carlo Maria Martini, *On the Body: A Contemporary Theology of the Body*, trans. R. M. Giammanco Frongia (New York: Crossroad, 2001); Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body: A Theology of Embodiment*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Continuum, 1995); Nancy R. Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018); Ola Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies: Incarnation, the Gaze, and Embodiment in Christian Theology*, trans. Carl Olsen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016); Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Revelatory Body: Theology as Inductive Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015); Samuel M. Powell and Michael E. Lodahl, eds., *Embodied Holiness: Toward a Corporate Theology of Spiritual Growth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999). From a nontheological perspective, contributions include Smith, ed., *Embodiment: A History*; Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2014).

¹⁰Allison, “Four Theses concerning Human Embodiment,” 157–58.

To advance a theology of human embodiment, I will offer some biblical and theological considerations, then turn to a discussion of the debated statement “I am my body.” I will then present an entailment of human embodiment—genderedness—and conclude with several applications of gendered embodiment.

III. BIBLICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Genesis 1:26–28 (ESV) underscores this fact of human embodied existence:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Following the divine deliberation (v. 26), God created human beings in his image, specifically male image bearers and female image bearers (v. 27). To these gendered embodied beings, God gave what is popularly called the cultural mandate, that is, the duty to build human society for the flourishing of its citizens. This responsibility consists of reflecting God in whose image they are made and representing God through procreation (“be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth”) and vocation (“subdue it and have dominion over” the rest of the created order).

A moment’s reflection leads us to affirm the essential embodiment of these human-beings-as-divine-image-bearers.¹¹ When we readers first come upon the word *man* (v. 26), we think immediately of the race of people who are embodied. We would never think of this embodied condition of human creation as strange (remember

¹¹Luke Timothy Johnson emphasizes that “humans bear God’s image in the world somatically.” Johnson, *Revelatory Body*, 55

Genesis 18). Moreover, because sex or gender (almost completely) maps onto embodiment, the actualization of the divine purpose means that embodied image bearers are either male or female (v. 27). We would never consider this gendered embodied condition of human creation as strange. Furthermore, the cultural mandate about procreation and vocation demands embodied people to accomplish. We would never envision a flourishing human society with embodied men and embodied women multiplying children and engaging in work as strange.

Embodiment is the proper state of human existence, by divine design and creation. The embodiment thesis is supported.

The next few chapters of Genesis rehearse the beginning of the fulfillment of the cultural mandate. It starts in the garden of Eden: “The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden to work it and watch over it” (Gen 2:15). While Adam and Eve’s mutual task of “Edenizing” the world through procreation and vocation was horribly complicated by their fall into sin, nonetheless they carry out their responsibilities as (now fallen) image-bearers:¹² “The man was intimate with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain [procreation]. She said, ‘I have had a male child with the Lord’s help.’ She also gave birth to his brother Abel [procreation]. Now Abel became a shepherd of flocks, but Cain worked the ground [vocation]” (Gen 4:1–2). This divinely designed duality of procreation and vocation repeats itself over and over again as “she conceived” and “he fathered” along with city building, tending livestock, musical artistry, and tool making (4:17–22). Importantly for our purposes, obedience to and fulfillment of the divinely given task of building human civilization is necessarily carried out by embodied image-bearers.

Embodiment is the proper state of human existence, by divine design and creation. The embodiment thesis is supported.

IV. THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION

One of the devastating results of the fall was the divine decision to punish sin with death. Whereas before their fall, Adam and Eve were not susceptible to death, after their catastrophic collapse, not

¹²For the notion of Edenizing the world, see William J. Dumbrell, *The Search for Order: Eschatology in Focus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 11.

only did they become liable to death, but the entire human race did as well. Importantly for our purposes, death is not only the cessation of the physiological functioning of the material aspect of human nature. It is also the separation of that material element from the immaterial element, often called the soul or the spirit. At death, the deceased person's body is sloughed off, laid in a grave or entombed or cremated, and begins to decay. Still, the person herself continues to exist in a disembodied state, with this important distinction: disembodied believers go immediately into the presence of the Lord in heaven and disembodied unbelievers go immediately into conscious torment in hell. Theologians refer to this as the intermediate state, the condition of deceased people between their death and the return of Jesus Christ (accompanied by bodily resurrection).

The obvious question arises: if human existence is possible in a disembodied state, how can I maintain my embodiment thesis? If deceased human beings can exist without their bodies, isn't it better to define the proper state of human existence as immaterial, yet with the usual but not necessary material component?

On the contrary, this condition of temporary disembodiment supports the embodiment thesis. The apostle Paul describes death, the intermediate state, and the resurrection with startling metaphors:

For we know that if our earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal dwelling in the heavens, not made with hands. Indeed, we groan in this tent, desiring to put on our heavenly dwelling, since, when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. Indeed, we groan while we are in this tent, burdened as we are, because we do not want to be unclothed but clothed, so that mortality may be swallowed up by life (2 Cor 5:1–5).

First, Paul presents death as the tearing down of our earthly tent, a dissolution of or separation from our body. Second, he gives assurance of our bodily resurrection, which involves a divinely prepared, eternal building, or re-embodiment with an incorruptible, strong, glorious, and Spirit-dominated body (1 Cor 15:42–44). Third, Paul quakes at what lies between the two events: the intermediate state,

in which we will be “naked” or “unclothed,” that is, disembodied. If the condition of disembodiment in the intermediate state is a horror to dread, we should not allow this abnormal situation to define human existence. Indeed, during life on earth, human existence is embodied. Following death, the intermediate state, and the resurrection, human existence will be embodied. Thus, the temporary condition of disembodiment does not overthrow the thesis that the proper state of human existence is embodiment.

It should also be called to mind that if Adam and Eve had not fallen, they would not have died as a punishment for sin. They would not have experienced the intermediate state; that is, they would never have been disembodied. Thus, the condition of disembodiment in the intermediate state is foreign to human experience as divinely designed. Though it is “natural” in the sense that it is common to all human beings after the fall, it is not “natural” in the sense that it is not the way it is supposed to be. Therefore, it should not be allowed to contradict the embodiment thesis.

Thus, embodiment is the proper state of human existence. Whereas God’s existence as embodied is strange, and whereas angels’ existence as embodied is strange, and whereas human existence as disembodied in the intermediate state is strange, human existence as embodied is natural and normal.

V. A DEBATED STATEMENT

This theology of embodiment prompts me to make the following statement: “I am my body.” So as to avoid confusion, it should be noted that I have not formulated the statement as “I am *only* my body.” Though I have only briefly mentioned it, human nature or constitution is complex, consisting of both an immaterial aspect and a material aspect. Though my discussion has focused on the later, bodily aspect, I by no means deny the immaterial aspect, which many call the soul or spirit (or, according to some, the soul and spirit).¹³ Moreover, as noted above, the intermediate state demands the ongoing existence of human beings as disembodied people; thus,

¹³Dichotomy was first articulated by Tertullian in his *Treatise on the Soul*. Trichotomy, against which Tertullian argued, had been proposed earlier by Irenaeus in his *Against Heresies*. For further discussion of the development of these two views, see: Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 322–27.

some type of immaterial existence is necessary for life after death. Thus, “I am *only* my body” is a false affirmation.

To focus on human embodiment, I frame the statement as “I am my body.” As expressed by the Russian philosopher, Vladimir Iljine, “Without this body I do not exist, and I am myself as my body.”¹⁴ Again, the affirmation of this statement applies to my earthly existence; to dismiss the statement because it is false in regard to the intermediate state misses the point of reference. Also, to disagree with the affirmation on the theoretical basis that I could exist with a different body is highly problematic, because with a different body—say that of my wife or that of my best friend—I would be a different person, a different “I.” Indeed, that idea is the point of the second phrase: “I am myself as my body.” Change my embodiment, and I am not *myself* but a *different* self. Once again, now expressed as a question, “Am I who I am principally in virtue of the fact that I have the body I have?”¹⁵ Exchange my body with that of another person, or in the case of my body not struggling to pass a kidney stone as I write this article, I am not who I am in virtue of the fact that I have a different body or I have the same body that does not implicate me in renal pain and sleeplessness.

The statement “I am my body” runs counter to prevalent views that have been expressed historically and in our contemporary context. As a first example, Plato played “a decisive role in the history of philosophy in establishing body and soul as a pair wherein the latter is superior to the former. . . . We see him minimizing the body’s participation in human life by defining it in simple terms as a tool and by isolating its care from the care of the soul.”¹⁶ To take another example, Aristotle, in *On the Soul* II, classified “body” as matter (*hylē*), the substratum or “substance that is *not* a this.”¹⁷ In contrast, he classified “soul” as form (*morphēn*), the shape “in virtue of which a thing *is* called ‘a this.’”¹⁸ Additionally, matter is potentiality and form is actuality; thus, “soul is ‘form and actuality of a natural body

¹⁴The statement by Vladimir Iljine is quoted without bibliographic detail in Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body*, 2.

¹⁵Smith, “Introduction,” 2.

¹⁶Brooke Holmes, “The Body of Western Embodiment: Classical Antiquity and the Early History of a Problem,” in *Embodiment: A History*, 41–42.

¹⁷Helen Lang, “Embodied or Ensouled: Aristotle on the Relation of Soul and Body,” in *Embodiment: A History*, 55.

¹⁸Lang, “Embodied or Ensouled,” 54.

able to have life'... As actuality, form acts as mover and body as matter and potentiality is moved, or acted upon by form."¹⁹ Clearly, then, for Aristotle, the soul is primary, the body is secondary. Indeed, according to Aristotle, when it is engaged in contemplation of eternal things (in this way, thinking like gods think), the human soul (with particular reference to the intellect) briefly experiences thinking that is both proper to soul and that is "perfect activity, free of body or matter." Such disembodied freedom of the soul is the "highest excellence" of human beings.²⁰

In the early church, these and other influences resulted in prioritizing the soul over the body. In his development of the concept of the image of God, for example, Tertullian explained that the nature of the soul includes "rationality, sensibility, intelligence, and freedom of the will."²¹ Coming close to identifying the image of God with the human soul, Justin Martyr offered, "In the beginning He [God] made the human race with the power of thought and of choosing the truth and doing right."²² And what of the body? The *Letter to Diognetus* rehearsed the tension between the lofty soul and the miserable body:

To sum up all in one word—what the soul is in the body, that are Christians in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body; and Christians dwell in the world, yet are not of the world... The flesh hates the soul, and wars against it, though itself suffering no injury, because it is prevented from enjoying pleasures; the world also hates the Christians, though in nowise injured, because they abjure pleasures. The soul loves the flesh that hates it, and [loves also] the members; Christians likewise love those that hate them. The soul is imprisoned in the body, yet preserves that very body; and Christians are

¹⁹Lang, "Embodied or Ensouled," 55, 58. The citation is from Aristotle, *On the Soul* II, 1,412a21.

²⁰Lang, "Embodied or Ensouled," 66–67.

²¹Tertullian, *Treatise on the Soul*, 38, in *ANF* 3:219.

²²Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 1.28, in *ANF* 1:172.

confined in the world as in a prison, and yet they are the preservers of the world.²³

The soul-destroying activity of the body should prompt Christians to desire death, at which point the soul is released from the body:

The flesh, since it is earthly, and therefore mortal, draws with itself [drags down] the spirit linked to it, and leads it from immortality to death.... The flesh hinders the spirit from following God.... But when a separation shall have been made between the body and the soul [at death], then evil will be disunited from good; and as the body perishes and the soul remains, so evil will perish and good be permanent. Then man, having received the garment of immortality, will be wise and free from evil, as God is.²⁴

Thankfully, at times the church has pushed back against this far too common disparagement of the body and sought to emphasize the intimate connectedness of the soul and the body. As an example, Patrick Lee and Robert P. George rehearse Thomas Aquinas's argument against Plato's notion of the body-soul relationship:

1. Sensing is a living, bodily act, that is, an essentially bodily action performed by a living being.
2. Therefore the agent that performs the act of sensing is a bodily entity, an animal.
3. But in human beings, it is the same agent that performs the act of sensing and that performs the act of understanding, including conceptual self-awareness.
4. Therefore, in human beings, the agent that performs the act of understanding (including conceptual self-awareness, what everyone refers to as "I") is a bodily entity, not a spiritual entity making use of the body as an extrinsic instrument.²⁵

Thus, Lee and George, building on Aquinas, make a strong case that what most theologians consider to be the classical faculties of

²³*Letter to Diognetus*, 6, in *ANF* 1:27.

²⁴Lactanius, *The Divine Institutes*, 4.25 and 7.5, in *ANF* 7:127 and 202.

²⁵Patrick Lee and Robert P. George, *Body-Self Dualism in Contemporary Ethics and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.

the “soul”—e.g., thinking, understanding, intellectually apprehending—have “an intrinsic need and functional orientation to matter or the body.”²⁶

To oversimplify, the church has perennially struggled to overcome the influence of Gnosticism and its contemporary expression in neo-Gnosticism, both of which privilege the immaterial element of human nature over the material element. Popular expressions of these positions include George MacDonald’s “You don’t have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body.”²⁷ This instrumentalist view of human embodiment demeans the material aspect of human nature or at least considers it to be of less importance than the immaterial aspect. Some even take their rejection of embodiment to a disconcerting extreme. C. S. Lewis quipped that “the fact that we have bodies is the oldest joke there is.”²⁸ Rejecting this perspective, I affirm to the contrary, “I am my body.”

Yet, Luke Timothy Johnson notes that MacDonald’s and Lewis’s position is not completely wrong: “Whereas there is some truth to the claim that I *have* a body, since I can in fact dispose of it in a number of ways, there is at least equal truth to the claim that I *am* my body. I cannot completely dispose of my body without at the same time losing myself. In strict empirical terms, when my body disappears, so do I.”²⁹ Adjusting Johnson’s view slightly, I aver that the statement “I *am* my body” is the ground for the statement “I *have* a body.” As I’ve written elsewhere:

Let me illustrate Johnson’s point. Because I *have* a body, I can sacrifice certain parts of it for the sake of others. For example, I can donate one of my kidneys so that someone whose kidneys are failing may, by organ transplantation, live. But if I sacrifice too much of my body, which I *have*—for example, if I donate both kidneys for the sake of others—then I (and I *am* my body) no

²⁶Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 17.

²⁷George MacDonald, *Annals of a Quiet Neighborhood* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1867), chap. 28.

²⁸C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960), 101.

²⁹Johnson, *Revelatory Body*, 80.

longer exist (that is, I'm dead). Thus, "I *am* my body" is the ground for "I *have* a body."³⁰

VI. GENDEREDNESS: AN ENTAILMENT OF HUMAN EMBODIMENT

Without developing it at length, I draw attention to the fact that embodiment entails genderedness.³¹ Simply put, a fundamental given of human existence is maleness or femaleness. Physiologically and genetically, gender maps almost completely onto (correlates with) embodiment. In rare cases, "a child is born with an ambiguous gender, and it is not clear whether the child is male or female. One form of this is known as intersex. Ambiguous gender results from a genetic abnormality."³² Because the condition of intersex affects from between .04% to 1.7% of the population and is a matter of genetics, its exceptional nature prevents me from including it as part of this discussion. Bracketing that condition, God's design for his image bearers is that they are gendered as either male or female.

Maleness and femaleness are well supported from the opening pages of Scripture. Following the divine deliberation to "create man in [God's] image," the narrative continues: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27). The divine plan to create beings who would be more like God than any other creatures results in human image bearers who are embodied and gendered. As noted above, God gives to both the cultural mandate to build society through procreation and vocation (Gen 1:28).

In terms of specific creative action, as for the first embodied male, "the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a

³⁰For further discussion, see Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body*, 1. She further illustrates this point: "I've a fever, 'my stomach's on strike,' 'my back's out of action'—that's how we first perceive our illnesses. We keep them from us, see them as an isolated defect which can be remedied in isolation, until one day we have to say, 'I'm sick.' Then we are saying something that we do not normally say of ourselves: that our destiny is to be bound up with our bodies. In a variety of situations we can distance ourselves from our bodies, but at some point they get hold of us and will not let go. 'I am my body.' . . . It is not only my body that is sick; I am sick. I am in my body. I have no other identity." Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body*, 21–22.

³¹Time and space constraints do not permit me to discuss the differences between sex and gender, so I will use the two words interchangeably.

³²Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 339.

living creature” (Gen 2:7). God then took Adam and placed him in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:8–9, 15–17); the first man was embodied and emplaced. Next, God formed the first embodied female: “So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man” (Gen 2:21–22). Out of Adam’s physicality, God fashioned Eve, whom Adam enthusiastically recognized as the divinely promised helper fit for him—with an emphasis on her embodied and gendered correspondence: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Gen 2:23). The first woman was embodied and emplaced, joining Adam in the garden. “Together and indispensably, they begin to engage in the cultural mandate involving procreation and vocation for human flourishing. They are able and obligated to carry out the mandate to build society because of, and only because of, their complementary genderedness. Adam and Eve are embodied human beings, and as such, they are fundamentally male and female.”³³

The binary pattern used in the creation of Adam and Eve did not differ from the pattern of binary creation that is narrated in Genesis 1 and 2, as seen in the following: heaven and earth; light and darkness; day and night; evening and morning; waters above and waters below; dry land and waters; two great lights (sun and moon); creatures of the sea and birds of the air; work and rest; two trees (of life, of knowledge); good and evil. That God created human beings as male or female is an application of the pattern of binary creation he employed leading up to the apex of his creation of his image bearers. Thus, a fundamental given of human existence is maleness or femaleness. God did not create an agendered being and then add on a secondary characteristic of maleness or femaleness. God did not create a superior male image bearer and then secondarily derive out of him an inferior female image-bearer.

Specifically, and contra Megan DeFranza, I do not believe the Genesis narrative portrays a spectrum of human genderedness that is patterned after the spectrum of other created things.³⁴ According

³³Allison, *Embodied*, 40.

³⁴Megan DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of*

to this idea, “night” and “day” (for example) are two terms that represent the two poles or ends of the spectrum of created temporality. Within these two poles, the spectrum features intermediate created realities that the biblical narrative does not mention (for example, dusk and dawn in between night and day) but that nonetheless exist. Following this spectrum of creation, then, human genderedness includes not only the male and female poles mentioned in the biblical text but other varieties between them as well: androgynous, pangender, transgender male, transgender female, demigender, two spirit, and many more.³⁵

What DeFranza seems to overlook is the biblical language of “separation” and “kinds.” In terms of the first matter, God separated light from darkness (Gen 1:4), the waters from the waters (Gen 1:6), the day from the night (Gen 1:14) and the light from the darkness (Gen 1:18). Difference or distinction, not a spectrum of intermediate realities, is emphasized textually. As for the second matter, God created vegetation, plants, fruit trees, great sea creatures, other watery creatures, winged birds, livestock, creeping things, and land beasts “according to their kinds” (Gen 1:11–12, 21, 24–25). To many of the creatures in this latter category, God gave the command to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:22). This duty could only be carried out by species that are binarily male and female, not a spectrum of intermediate realities. Accordingly, the biblical language of “separation” and “kinds” underscores difference and distinction, not the spectrum of intermediaries that DeFranza’s position highlights.

Importantly, for our discussion, human beings are either male or female by divine design. Indeed, God’s assessment of the creation newly brought to completion was “it was very good” (Gen 1:31). This judgment included the goodness of human image bearers who were male and female. What was pleasing to the Creator and what was certainly pleasant to the original image bearers, Adam and Eve, continues to be pleasant to the vast majority of people today. According to Frederica Mathewes-Green,

For large segments of the world, gender differences are

God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

³⁵Estimates vary, but the number of different genders claimed by people runs between fifty and eighty.

pleasant, appealing, and enjoyable, and practical application of theory—reproduction itself—is hardly a chore. (The subtitle of a Dave Barry book put it winningly: ‘How to make a tiny person in only nine months, with tools you probably have around the home.’) Yes, most cultures note and highlight gender differences, because most people find them delightful, as well as useful in producing the next generation.³⁶

VII. APPLICATION OF ENGENDERED EMBODIMENT

This theology of human embodiment, with a particular emphasis on genderedness, can be helpful in our discussions about what constitutes a human person, our interactions with those who experience gender dysphoria, our theologizing about transgenderism/transageism/ transracialism/trans-speciesism, our pastoral care for those wrestling with problems of heterosexuality and homosexuality, our condemnation of dehumanization and objectification, our counseling of those struggling with body image, and more. A theology of embodiment does not ease the pain that the people with whom we are interacting face. Nor does it substitute for the compassion that we are called to express toward them. But it does provide a foundation on which to build our counseling and care ministries.

Engendered embodiment also compels us to reconsider our view of and posture toward men and women. First and foremost, our theology underscores that all human beings are image bearers whose gender (almost always) maps onto their embodiment. All women and all men are divine image-bearers and, as such, are worthy to be accorded respect and treated with dignity. We do not have the right to interfere with other image-bearers and/or to detract from their image-bearing and/or to destroy the purpose for which God created them. As divine image-bearers who exist in community, we do not have the right to be isolated from others or to isolate others from us; to refuse help to others or to refuse to be helped by others; to deface the image-bearing of others or to permit being defaced by others. Moreover, in terms of redeemed image-bearers, women and

³⁶Frederica Mathewes-Green, “The Subject Was Noses: What Happens When Academics Discover That We Have Bodies,” *Books and Culture* (January/February 1997): 14–16. Her reference is to Dave Barry, *Babies and Other Hazards of Sex* (New York: Rodale Books, 2000).

men are called to love and honor one another: “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom 12:10). Scripture often employs familial images to help us envision how to express our relationships with one another: “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity” (1 Tim 5:1–2). The metaphor of siblingship has a prominent place in the NT to instruct us how female believers and male believers are to relate to one another.³⁷ Admittedly, the church has a long way to go to embrace and actualize this vision. A theology of gendered embodiment can serve this transformation.

This theology also challenges us to reconsider how we view our own embodiment. Do we live the reality that “I am my body” or do we consider our body in instrumentalist terms, as something to be used or managed or stewarded like we do our time, money, gifts, and other resources? Such a perspective of our own embodiment shows up in statements like “I need to feed my body only certain types of foods in order to keep it tuned up like a fine car” or “I must exercise incessantly so that my body will perform at peak performance.” Certainly, proper nutrition and regular exercise are important for us as embodied beings, but such statements belie an instrumentalist view of embodiment, as if our bodies are somehow outside of ourselves or different from ourselves. As my theology of embodiment proposes, this perspective, though widespread and entrenched in our mindset, is not the right way to consider our bodies. God’s creation of us to be his embodied image-bearers stands against this view. As Frederica Mathewes-Green offers, “The initial impression that we stand critically apart from our bodies was our first mistake. We are not merely passengers riding around in skin tight racecars; we are our bodies. They embody us.”³⁸

Embodiment is the proper state of human existence.



³⁷For further discussion, see Aimee Byrd, *Why Can't We Be Friends? Avoidance is Not Purity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2018).

³⁸Mathewes-Green, “Subject Was Noses,” 14–16.