

Introduction

How Does the Gospel Shape Manhood and Womanhood?

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The lips of the young woman quivered. Tears rolled down her face. Her angry father stared at her. “I thought you were the kind of girl who didn’t get into this sort of trouble,” he said. She looked back at him, confused and adrift: “I guess I don’t really know what kind of girl I am.”

This exchange came in *Juno*, a poignant film made a few years ago. It’s a quick scene, but it has stuck with me ever since. In this young woman’s reply, I heard the confusion of an entire generation. So many young men and young women don’t know who they are. They’ve never been taught what a man or a woman is. They may have seen terrible pain in their home, and they may have grown up without a father, or less commonly, without a mother. Or they might have had a father and a mother, but their home was compromised by sin in some way. The family didn’t eat together. The

parents weren't happy together. The children grew up without discipleship or investment.

This is 2015. Families are struggling. As one would expect, many young men and young women lack a road map—a script—for their lives. When you're in this confusing and confused state, you don't have answers to the most basic questions about your life. This is true of your fundamental identity, which includes your manhood or womanhood. What do I mean by this?

You Need to Know Who You Are

Many high schoolers, college students, and twentysomethings know they have a body (this is kind of obvious); further, they know they're a boy or a girl, a man or a woman; and they know they want to follow Jesus. But they have little sense of how these realities intertwine. They don't know what their gender, their sexuality, is *for*. So they're tentative. They're confused. Quietly, perhaps with some shame, they ask these kinds of questions in their own minds:

- What is my purpose?
- Why do I have this body?
- What does it mean to be a man or a woman?

This book is intended to help you figure out who you were made to be. We want to give you an inspiring vision for your life as a young man or a young woman. We see that our society is training you to think wrongly about gender and sexuality. It's telling you things like: there are no essential differences between men and women; you can change your gender if you want, and that's totally fine; you can be attracted to whomever comes most naturally to you—boys can like boys, girls can like girls; and finally, there are no responsibilities or callings that come with being a man or a woman—you do whatever you like.

In this book, we're going to show that these ideas are false and harmful. We're going to offer true words and biblical counsel to you so you can know who you are and what you were created for.

We will see that we are designed by God, and that his design brings us joy.

We're not going to simply offer you "Ten Tips to Be the Manly Man's Man, the Manliest of Them All" or "Five Ways to Make Doilies and Sing Nineteenth-Century Hymns at the Same Time." We're coming at all this from a fresh perspective. You can almost hear the can cracking open as you read these words. We want you to see that the gospel, the good news of Jesus's saving death and life-giving resurrection, is the central fact, the most important part, of your life as a God-loving man or woman. The gospel saves us, remakes us, and helps us understand who we truly are and what we are called to be for God's glory and our joy.

The gospel is what frees us from our sin. The gospel is what allows us to live to the full, our hearts soaring, our pulses pounding, our lives stretching before us, full of hope, full of meaning. With this in our minds, let's now consider four ways that the gospel shapes us as men and women.

The Gospel Makes Sense of the Image of God

One of the foundational realities of human beings, men and women alike, is that we are made in the image of God. See Genesis 1:26–27, which reads:

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.

In other words, we're created in a special way to display the full-orbed grandeur of our Creator. We do this by creating, by thinking,

by taking dominion, and by enjoying relationships with one another.

But even this awe-inspiring theological truth can be a bit abstract, can't it? What role, we might wonder, do our bodies have to play in being the image of God?

Before we're converted, we understand that we are either male or female. That's well and good. But it's only when we're saved by the grace of almighty God that we truly begin to grasp the meaning of our bodies, our sexuality. We are created as men or as women to inhabit our manhood and womanhood to the glory of our Maker. He did not make us all the same. He loves diversity. He revels in it. He created a world that pulses with difference, that explodes with color, that includes roaring waterfalls and self-inflating lizards and rapt, at-attention meerkats. But humankind, man and woman, is the pinnacle of his creation.

In Christ, we understand that our manhood or womanhood is not incidental. It's not unimportant. It is the channel through which we will give God glory all our days. We have been put here to "image" God. After conversion, we understand that we're here to give evidence of his greatness. We do that in substantial part by receiving our God-given sexuality as a gift. God created us as "male and female," not as something else. The passage above states three separate times that God "created" the man and woman, stressing God's role in making the man and woman his image bearers. There is intentionality, wisdom, and purpose in the creation of Adam and Eve, as the gospel frees us to see.

Simply receiving and reveling in this reality is a matter of worship. It's not complicated, but it is profound. *I am a man or a woman designed in just this way by God*, we should think to ourselves as we consider the body given us from above. *In the same way that the Grand Canyon was created to show God's power, and the skies his handiwork, as a man or a woman I was formed to display the beauty of his brilliant design*. In our fallenness, we're tempted to think that we have no greater reason to live, and that

we're only "dust in the wind," as the famous song says. In truth, we are diamonds in the wilderness. We're no genetic accident, no freakish outcome of history. We're the special creation of God.

You could sum these thoughts up like this: as believers, we're not Christian Teletubbies. We're not gospel blobs. We're not the redeemed androgynous. We are gospel-captivated *men* and gospel-captivated *women*. When converted, we come to understand that our bodies are given us as vessels by which to put God's wisdom and intelligence and love on display.

Whether single or married, whether young or old, we have been given our manhood or womanhood as a blessing. Our bodies, with their distinctive designs, tell us that there is an exhilarating intelligence, and a grander story, behind our frame and form.

The Gospel Gives Us Power over Our Natural Weaknesses

The gospel is our fundamental marker of identity. The work of Christ applied to our hearts is such an unstoppable, unopposable force that it refigures us entirely. It's as if our old boundary markers have completely fallen away, as Paul says: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 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" (Gal. 3:27–28). This text doesn't mean that the gospel wipes out manhood and womanhood. It *does* mean that our fundamental reality in life is our identity in Jesus Christ.

This has immense practical value for us. As men and women, we might be tempted toward certain stereotypes. Some young men might think that being a man means bench-pressing 250 pounds, dunking a basketball, or fighting off bears with their bare hands in their spare time. (Actually, if you do that, you are pretty manly.) Some young women might think that being a woman means being sexually desirable, a lover of literature, and having a certain image. Both groups can know that we are easily tempted to find our manly and womanly identity in stereotypes. The gospel is bad news for our

stereotypes. It tells us that men are self-sacrificial leaders, and that women are fearless followers of Christ.

We're going to be pulled as men and women toward certain ungodly behaviors. Men today are told that they are idiots, little boys who never grow up. We see such immaturity in Adam's initial failure to protect the woman God gave him. We also see his selfishness in his move to blame Eve for eating the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:1–7, 12). Men are tempted by an array of sins, but they must know that the gospel is the dread foe of their laziness, selfishness, irresponsibility, and immaturity. The leaders of Scripture do not look kindly on immaturity. "Show yourself a man," David says to Solomon (1 Kings 2:2). We men hear this call today. We recognize that Jesus has the same challenge for us—and has all the grace we need to meet it.

Women today are told that their value is in their looks, or their social skills, or their ability to dominate men. We see such a desire in Eve's being deceived by the serpent and her post-fall desire to "rule over" her husband (Gen. 3:16). This is an ancient problem with modern consequences. Women are told today that they will find fulfillment and lasting happiness in being strong. They are urged to use their sexuality as a tool of empowerment. They are challenged to disdain femininity. Christian women will feel these and other temptations pull at them, but they must know that the gospel shows us a better way. It opens a door to a happier world, a world of joy. In Christ, the power of sin is overcome and the distinct beauty of womanhood is celebrated.

The world gives us false visions of happy manhood and fulfilled womanhood. It's like the dinner plate that looked so good on your friend's Instagram but tastes so bad on your plate. Selfish manhood and "fierce" womanhood are not too big for us, though; these visions of our lives are too small. Sin always looks like a monster but ends up like a mouse. It has no power over us. It has no hold on us. We don't cower in the face of the world's temptations. We laugh at them.

We scorn the principalities and powers of this age. *You think lust and power are going to entice me?* we say. *Your vision of happiness is too small. Show me a picture of my life as a man or a woman that echoes into eternity and you'll have my attention.* In Christ, we have found something better than all the world throws at us. In him, we become the men or women we were designed to be.

The Gospel Shows Us the Goodness of Limits

I remember going to basketball camp as a youngster. Part of the expectation of basketball camp is that you will hear at least one speech per week telling you that if you just practice enough, you can be the next LeBron.

You may never have dribbled a basketball, but chances are you have heard something similar. We've all been told this kind of message over and over and over again: "You are amazing. You are a star! You can be whatever you want! There are no limits in life for you." Many of us have heard of this formulation so many times that it's second nature to us. We naturally assume it's true.

This kind of thinking is embedded in modern culture. It's not just a cheesy mantra, though. It's a spiritual system in its own right. In my book *Risky Gospel*, I even give it a name: "narcissistic optimistic deism." I think this is the new "moralistic therapeutic deism." The basic view of narcissistic optimistic deism is this:

- Life is fundamentally about me.
- I deserve for life to get better and to allow me to achieve all my dreams.
- God exists to bless me and make my dreams come true.

If this sounds like a Disneyfied Christianity, that's because it is. All that's missing is a little flying insect with a magic wand. A major outcome of this way of thinking is this: you end up believing that you don't have any limits, and that if someone suggests that you do, that's a bad thing. People who might offer constructive criticism are

in reality “haters.” They’re in the wrong, and you’re in the right, because if your heart feels it and wants it, it must be good.

This perspective is disastrous for our spiritual health. It fails to account for our fallenness, our inherent sinfulness, which means that every part of us has been corrupted by the fall of Adam (see Isa. 64:6; Rom. 3:10–18). This perspective has influenced the way many people look at their bodies and lives. They say, “I can be whatever I want to be.” Being a man or a woman doesn’t end up meaning anything. There’s no structure or order to life.

There are many outworkings of this problem. If a couple is married and the man doesn’t feel like working, then he stays home. If the wife doesn’t really want to spend much time with her kids, she doesn’t. If a teenage boy feels like a woman, then he’s free to embrace womanliness. If a twentysomething woman is attracted to other women, then she should act on that instinct. Narcissistic optimistic deism tells us that whatever we want to do or be, that’s great. God is the great cheerleader in the sky. No matter what we do, he’s for us. He endorses all our appetites and commends all our instincts.

This view has as much to do with the biblical God as cronuts do with Genghis Khan. Too many people today tragically follow a fairy tale god. The God of Scripture is not our life coach. He is our *Lord*. We’re used to this word as Christians, and so it loses its edge. This divine title signifies that God is our master. He is our sovereign. He is our ruler. He sets the tone for right and wrong. He calls us to account for our sin.

His gospel brings both bad news and good news. It informs us that we are sinful and destined for eternal judgment (Rev. 20:14). It calls us to be re-created (Col. 3:1–10). Our chief need is not affirmation but Christ-powered transformation (Rom. 12:1–2). When it comes to our sexuality, we have God-appointed limits. These limits are not bad; they are good, and good for us. Men are called to be men. Women are called to be women. We are not free to choose our sexual predilections. We do not have the authority to remake our gender.

The gospel opens our eyes to the goodness of our manhood and womanhood, and the corresponding beauty of living according to God's design. We are not exhilarated by breaking free from God's wise and life-giving limits. When Adam and Eve failed to listen to God by disobeying his commands and ignoring their divinely mandated boundaries, they fell, and we all fell with them (Gen. 3:1–7). It was not life that came through their recklessness, but death.

Everywhere around us our culture celebrates rebellion and narcissistic willfulness. The Scripture calls us to something better, and this call envelops all our identity, including our manliness or womanliness. Don't try to become something you're not. Embrace who God made you to be, and what he calls you to be in his Word. That, and not the selfish creeds of a Disneyfied age, is where you will find true happiness and true liberation.

The Gospel Unlocks Joy for Men and Women

Sometimes, when Christians talk about embracing biblical gender roles, we're heard as only wanting people to do what's right. Let us make this clear: above all, we complementarians want to be godly men and godly women who experience the joy that comes from knowing God and living under his Word.

When you're saved, you no longer see any area of life as a burden. You see all of it as a garden of delight. Everything before you presents an opportunity to give praise and honor to your Creator and Savior (1 Cor. 10:31). This extends, in fact, even to what you eat and drink—in other words, to the most basic parts of your daily existence! That's incredible.

This helps us make sense of how we are to live as men and women. We know now that as blood-bought believers, we have the opportunity to magnify God's greatness and goodness as men and women. Our sexuality, then, is not incidental. It's not unimportant. It's not a curse that we want to get rid of. It's not a burden that God has given us that we do everything we can to downplay. Our manhood and womanhood is a God-designed pathway to delight.

Our sexuality wasn't designed by a secular entrepreneur, a victimizing pornographer, or a Jason Bourne wannabe. Manhood was produced by the spectacular intelligence of the Father. Womanhood was created by the cosmic brilliance of the Father. Our culture tells us the opposite: "Sure, you may be born with a few certain parts, but that doesn't mean anything. Men and women are interchangeable. Gender is malleable, changeable, unfixed, unimportant." This is the opposite of the biblical witness. God made Adam as a man. Then God made Eve, an image bearer like Adam as a human being, but unlike him as a woman. She had a purpose in creation: to be his "helper," a noble title befitting a high calling (Gen. 2:18).

When Yahweh brought Eve to Adam, the man did not glumly nod his head in acknowledgment. He exploded with praise and delight:

Then the man said,

"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)

If this is read in church, it's probably read flatly, without a lot of emphasis. In reality, the whole section should be in ALL CAPS. The man "at last" has his covenantal partner. He is lonely no longer; he has a helpmate; he finds the woman unlike him, fearfully and wonderfully made, and this difference thrills him and causes him to shout praise to his Maker.

The body, we see, is good. Manhood is good. Womanhood is good. We don't all look the same according to our sex. Not every man has thick shoulders and a lantern jaw. Not every woman has a certain figure and lustrous locks. But whatever we look like, we all give immense glory to God simply by living joyfully as men or as women, savoring our divine design, seizing opportunities (as later chapters discuss) to live obediently as followers of Christ according to our sex and our foundational Christian calling.

This is why we're here. This is what the complementarian movement, bursting with life, is all about. This is our hope and prayer for you: that in owning your manhood and womanhood and viewing it through the clarifying lens of the gospel, you would give God much glory, and experience much joy.

Refigured Identity

I want to leave you with a true story that pulls together much of what we've covered here. It's a story of a little boy whose body was weak. He couldn't walk, and he was carried everywhere he went. Over time, he became needy and weepy. If you saw him, you would have pitied him. He was not even ten years of age, and he was already way behind.

But then something happened. The little boy was adopted by a Christian family. This was no ordinary family, however. It was one led by a godly father, a man whose blend of kindness and authority drew respect from his wife and children. His wasn't the ultra-modern home you see on Hulu nowadays—teens eye-rolling, chaos reigning, Dad zoned out on his iPhone, Mom trying to tame the far-past-gone toddlers. This was a home where a father trained and pastored his children, and a mother devoted herself to her kids. This was a home where you were expected to pull your weight, pursue maturity, and sacrifice your interests to those of others.

This was the home the little boy entered. He couldn't have articulated his feelings, but he knew something was different. There was order. There was discipline. And there was love, abundant love, that spilled out into laughter and playing and real conversation. But the boy wasn't the only one watching. The father was watching, too. He thought to himself, *This boy isn't lame. He's not gonna be a track star. But I think he can walk.*

After a couple of days, he decided not to keep these thoughts to himself. He gently prodded the little boy, his new son, to try walking. So the boy did. At first it didn't go well. Walking wasn't supposed to happen. His self-identity was fixed. But then something

clicked. The boy took one step, then another. A lurch became a walk. Pretty soon he, too, was caught up in the whirl of the home. He wasn't the fastest, and the other kids had to help him at times. But the switch was back on. The boy had come alive. His strength was bigger than his weakness. His identity was refigured.

This true story elegantly illustrates what happens when the gospel speaks into our sexuality. We gain strength from the power of Christ's redemptive work to become who we were made by God to be. Once we were weak; now, in the Spirit, we are strong.

Once, like the young woman in *Juno*, we didn't know what kind of man or woman we are. We didn't know what our manhood or womanhood was *for*. Now, in Christ, we understand. Now, like a child taking his first faltering steps, we are free to walk. Now, in Christ, we are free to run.