

What does it mean that Jesus was known for love? Hough provides a biblical and theological framework for answering the hard questions we encounter in a sexually broken world. Drawing from a well of faithful scholars, this book helps us live into these days with faithful and truly loving hearts.

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CHAPTER ONE



Exploring the Biblical-Theological Framework One

CREATION: “And It Was Very Good”

A few years ago, I got into studying my family history. There was a free trial available through one of those ancestry websites, so I signed up and started digging.

During that time, I made several phone calls to my mom and dad to get details about our family. Honestly, I became a little obsessed. I toyed with the idea of sending in a DNA sample to learn more, but something about sending a swab of my spit to a stranger who would enter my information into a global database felt a little too intrusive. Anyway, I dug as deeply as I could before my trial ran out, but I eventually hit a wall. Still, I made it back to the eleventh century. Maybe one day, I will have more time and money to keep going.

As I studied my family's history, I learned things that brought me a lot of joy and others that brought me sorrow. One of the joy-filling things was seeing pictures of old properties that my ancestors likely lived on several centuries ago. In fact, I could pull up a castle that was supposedly owned by some of my ancestors. For a brief time, my kids were convinced that we still had some claim of ownership to that castle. To their disappointment, I explained that it doesn't work that way.

One of the things that brought me dismay, though, was that I had at least one relative who served as a chaplain with the Confederate Army during the Civil War. As a father of two beautiful African American daughters, it pains me to know that some of my ancestors would have viewed my children as property. I cannot change my family's history, but by God's grace, my family's future doesn't have to conform to the sins of previous generations. I'm so grateful for the transforming power of God's grace in Christ.

My study of my family's history was motivated by a desire to know more about my identity. The question that led me to sign up for that trial and spend all those hours searching through the database was, "Who am I?" There was something about knowing who I am that I believed was intimately related to how I lived in this world. Deep down, I think I was hoping to discover that I was the descendant of a long line of gospel ministers who gave their lives in service to Christ. Or maybe learn that I was related to missionaries who took the gospel to the nations. But none of that came to fruition. Instead, I learned that my family history, while special to me, is not unlike many other family histories: full of excitement and disappointment. After all, all our family histories are family histories of sinners.

Part of the problem with my study, though, is that it simply needed to go back further. If I wanted to know who I am and how I am to live

in this world, then I would have to get back to the beginning of it all. I had to get back to where it all started.

IN THE BEGINNING: IMAGE BEARERS

So, what did Jesus say, believe, and teach about the beginning of humanity? In Matthew 19, when the Pharisees questioned Him about divorce, Jesus referred back to creation. The Pharisees asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” Jesus responded, “Haven’t you read that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’ . . . ?”

His response reveals that He understood the Creator’s work as a divine revelation about God’s purpose for human sexuality, gender, and marriage. Jesus continued, stating, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh . . . Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (vv. 4–5).

We don’t have to wonder what Jesus thought or believed about the beginning of humanity. He reveals His beliefs in this conversation. Notice how Jesus quotes approvingly from Genesis 1 and 2 as a revelation of God’s purpose for humans from the beginning. We should understand these opening chapters of the Bible to reveal a Creator God who not only brings the world into existence but also orders that world for a purpose. While understanding the origins of our world as important, it is also important to take note of the order of our world from the beginning.

Old Testament scholar Sandra Richter describes this opening scene in Genesis as “God’s blueprint for creation.”¹ Richter explains that God can be seen creating and ordering a world of “interdependence,” where both habitats and inhabitants exist according to His

plan. In ancient times, both God’s creation and His ordering of the world were understood to be closely related. Each aspect of creation

The world was not to be an empty, chaotic, formless void. God, in creating and ordering the world, reveals what He intends for His creation.



has a role to play in the grand story that God is telling us about His purpose.

For most people of the ancient Near East, the story of God saying, “Let there be light” on the first day of creation would have pointed them not to “the creation of what physicists call light” but instead to “the setting up of the cycle of day and night—the creation of the basis for time.”²

The same thing could be said for subsequent days where the basis for weather and vegetation were established. God’s creation was ordered for a purpose. Even the sequencing of the days of creation points to the importance of recognizing order and purpose in creation. The world was not to be an empty, chaotic, formless void. God, in creating and ordering the world, reveals what He intends for His creation.

In the first three days, God created and ordered the “habitats” or “kingdoms” of day and night, the sea and sky, and the dry land. Then, over the next three days, God created inhabitants that would be placed in their respective habitats. The sun and moon would “rule the day and night, the fish and birds would occupy the sea and sky, and the other creatures would inhabit the dry land.”³ The creation story, however, does not end at the beginning of the sixth day.

According to Genesis 1:26, God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” While

some translations refer to "man" being created in the image of God, the language in Genesis 1:26 is intentionally collective, which means that it refers to both male and female being created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) and bearing the responsibility to rule over the rest of creation.⁴ Male and female are both created in God's image, having equal dignity and playing important roles in God's plan.

Humanity, as the bearers of God's image, would enjoy a special role in creation. As John Walton, a noted scholar of the ancient Near East, wrote, "When God creates people in his image it indicates, perhaps among other things, that we are to function as his stewards over creation."⁵

Christians have debated what exactly it means to be God's image bearers, but they have not doubted the fact that humans possess a special relationship to God. Humanity enjoys a special relationship with God that no other created thing enjoys. Don't rush by the significance of being created in God's image. As one theologian put it,

Whatever else the *imago Dei* might mean, there can be little doubt that it stands as paradigmatic of all creation in its calling to reflect or mirror God. It is an exhilarating and exalting description, intended to signify the privilege of imaging God. It is also a humbling description, reminding humankind that it is not divine, but merely an image of the Creator.⁶

What a thought, right? Humanity is unique in its relationship to God. While I love my pets, they don't bear God's image like my children. There is something very special about our relationship to God as our Creator.

With this special relationship comes certain responsibilities or tasks defined by God Himself. Humans are tasked with a special role

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in creation to glorify God. Think of how children will, for better or worse, reflect certain characteristics of their family. We tend to reflect what we see. And similarly, each of us, having been stamped as God's image bearers, will, even at times unknowingly, reflect aspects of His creative character in our words and deeds.

Sadly, however, our ability to perceive and reflect God's image has been significantly impacted by sin. Our vision of who God is and what He has called us to do does not come as naturally to us as it did for the first humans. This is why it is so crucial for us to return to and reflect on the beginning because who we are and how we are to live in the world is defined by our unique relationship with God Himself.

LORD AND RULER OVER ALL

If we stop reading at the end of Genesis 1, though, we will miss out on a crucial aspect of the creation story on the seventh day. According to Genesis 2:1–3, after completing His creative work, God “rested from all his work,” then “blessed the seventh day and made it holy.” By concluding the creation account with God's own rest from and reflection on creation, God is presented as the ultimate Lord and Ruler over creation, a theme found throughout Scripture. As the Lord over creation, God gives us our identity and tells us how we are to live to glorify Him.

In Genesis 2, we find a more detailed account of the creation of humanity with the benefit of learning more about their relationship to God and one another. Regarding humanity's relationship with God, they were free to enjoy and steward God's creation in the garden of Eden as His image bearers on earth. The only stipulation that they were given was to “not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2:17). Again, I found Sandra Richter's thought


on this point helpful. Commenting on the "stipulations," Richter wrote, "The blessings are many, the stipulations few. In fact, the only negative stipulation of this covenant is 'you shall not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.' On the surface this seems like a simple, even silly rule. But in reality this one edict encompasses the singular law of Eden—God is God and we are not."⁷

We must not miss this crucial aspect of creation. While there are many debates within Christianity about the particulars of creation that will likely continue (e.g., the age of the earth, the mechanism of creation, the length of days), such debates should not prevent us from affirming certain truths about creation and their implications for our lives.⁹ I fear that while such debates can be important, they can also be overly complicated, leading us to ignore the significance of creation for everyday discipleship.¹⁰ If creation teaches us anything, it teaches us that God is unique and distinct from humanity.

As the Creator, He is Lord over His creation.

The Creator-creature distinction must be acknowledged. Without this distinction, we will not know or love God as we have been called to know and love Him, nor will we live in the world as we have been called to live. If we get the significance of the beginning wrong, we will get everything else wrong too. Jesus knew this was the case, so He pointed the Pharisees back to the beginning to answer their questions about marriage and divorce, which has profound implications for our questions about sexuality in this broken world.

*Creation is the initial act and foundation of all divine revelation and therefore the foundation of all religious and ethical life as well.*⁸ —
Herman Bavinck



KNOWN FOR LOVE
AND IT WAS VERY GOOD

The implications of Genesis 1–2 for our understanding of God’s world and God’s Word are hard to overstate. For one, we see the goodness of creation as God intended, which ought to stir us to be good stewards of it. Those who take God’s Word seriously ought to be mindful of things like animal welfare and creation care. Furthermore, Genesis 1–2 should help us see that creation is not without purpose. What God has created and ordered is not endlessly malleable. We are called to be stewards of creation, not anarchists. We are free but within boundaries. And when we violate the boundaries God has established for us within His creation, things go horribly wrong.

As we watch Jesus speak with the Pharisees, we see that things like divorce are concessions within a world that has gone bad. God’s purpose in creating male and female and joining them together as one flesh in marriage is the ideal. As we have already seen, as the Lord over creation, God does more than create; He also orders His creation. And as Genesis 1:31 shows us, God’s created order, before sin’s entrance into the world, was “very good.”

This “very good” order, as the ideal of creation, does not get erased when humanity rebels against God. Instead, it remains the divine pattern for humanity, as Jesus’ interaction with the Pharisees demonstrates. While a concession in certain circumstances was made for divorce later through Moses, that does not mean that it was God’s plan for His creation from the beginning. Thus, Jesus points the Pharisees back to the very good creation to teach us whom God made us to be in this world: image bearers who bring Him glory.

“GOODNESS LOOKS LIKE GOD”

Jesus’ appeal to “the beginning” is a paradigm for discerning the essential goodness of our thoughts and behaviors. Among a host of other reasons, we can trust Jesus’ teaching on goodness because He has definitively declared that “goodness” is found in God alone.¹¹

In Luke 18:18, a certain rich man asked Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit life?” Jesus responded, “No one is good—except God alone.” Jesus did not deny His goodness as God incarnate with His response to the young man, but instead, He was correcting the misunderstanding that “goodness” can be defined by a “teacher.” If we would recognize the good, then we must recognize it in relationship to God. Or, as Iain Provan puts it, “Goodness looks like God.”¹²

God is the one who first utters the declaration, “and it was good.” To do so, He must not only know what goodness is but also be the source of the definition of goodness. Before creation, the existence of goodness dwelt securely within the life of the triune God. In other words, when God created the world and declared it to be “good,” the goodness of creation was relative to the goodness of God Himself. We can only know that something is good because of its relationship to the One who alone is good in Himself. Only God can define “good” because being “good” is part of His essence.

Much as how holiness, love, justice, righteousness, and life depend upon God for their definition, “good” finds its source in God alone. If we could appeal to someone or something outside of God to define these fundamental aspects of God’s nature and creation, then the thing we appeal to would functionally have more authority than God Himself. And to appeal to a higher authority than God Himself would be to make God no god at all. Hence, Christians must heed Jesus’ teaching to the rich young man and look to God alone for our

understanding of the “good,” especially as it relates to creation.

With each day of creation, God declared the existence and purpose of creation to be good, climaxing with Genesis 1:31, where He says, “and it was very good.” These words “emphasize the perfection of the final work” of creation.¹³ It is a comprehensive statement about the whole creation. Nothing that God has made is exempted from His declaration that “it was very good.”

GENERAL AND SPECIAL REVELATION

When God makes such a declaration about His creation, we must recognize that such goodness is inextricably related to God’s order and intention for His creation. It is not enough to acknowledge that God has created all things. God’s statement presupposes that His creation conforms to His intention for creation. Another way to state this would be to say that in order for something to be good, it must conform to God’s will. We can know God’s will because He has graciously chosen to reveal it. But how has He revealed it? Christians have typically spoken of God’s revelation of His will in two forms: general revelation (sometimes referred to as “natural revelation”) and special revelation.

General revelation refers to how God has revealed Himself in creation. Theologian Michael Bird offers this definition for general (or natural) revelation: it is “the disclosure of God’s existence and attributes as discerned through human intuition and as inferred from nature.”¹⁴ Even though sin has distorted our perspective of this general revelation, humans are still held accountable to God. The apostle Paul makes this point in Romans 1:20–22, where he mentions the revelation of God’s invisible attributes in the things that were made.

Jesus regularly pointed to natural occurrences to make a point about who God is and how we are to live. Just think of Jesus telling

the crowds to consider the lilies or watch the birds and reflect upon how God cares for them. What was the lesson to be learned? If God takes care of flowers and birds, then you don't have anything to worry about. God's going to take care of you too. This is an example of general revelation being used by Jesus to teach us about God and about ourselves. Yet, this general revelation, while sufficient up to a point, is not sufficient for navigating this world. We need God's special revelation to know who we are and how we are to faithfully live as image bearers.

What, then, is special revelation? Again, I find theologian Michael Bird's definition helpful. Special revelation is "God's unique and supernatural communication of himself."¹⁵ So, unlike what can be known about God through creation and human intuition, special revelation occurred through events "like the exodus or the resurrection of Christ." Furthermore, as Bird continues, it was observed through the "inspired proclamation of the prophets and apostles." Then, as most of us likely know it, special revelation occurs in the form of Scripture, which Christians understand to be "breathed-out" or "inspired" by God Himself "through human authors to produce written texts."¹⁶

God's special revelation is what sinful humanity needs to properly understand God, His salvation, and His intention in the world. While general revelation might point us vaguely to some of these realities, ultimately, we need God's supernatural intervention to give us wisdom. This is the same kind of revelation that the humans in the garden of Eden received as God commanded them to "be fruitful and multiply on the earth." It was God's special revelation, His very words to Adam and Eve, that revealed His will for their lives. They knew who they were and how they were to live because God had told them. And God had already declared that His creation and will for humanity were good. Very good.

RECOGNIZING THE GOOD

So, in recognizing the good, we must ask, “What is God’s will? What has He revealed to us about the good?” At this point, I want it to be clear that I am using the language of “recognizing the good” instead of saying “defining the good.” As the Creator God, He has already “defined the good” for us. Our task as image bearers is not to define or redefine what is good, but rather to recognize the good as He has revealed it and conform our lives to that very good design.

As we observe God’s creation in Genesis 1–2, we can perceive that God ordered His creation toward life. As humanity worked the land, they would cultivate food that would sustain them in their work to expand the garden. As they enjoyed marital union, they would fulfill the mandate to “be fruitful and multiply,” resulting in offspring who would carry on the image-bearing work. And they would engage in this work until the day when the whole earth was a garden filled with the presence of the Lord among His people. And this life would be good because it was the life that the good God had called His people to in His good creation. All of creation would reflect the goodness of God. But, as we will see, humanity did not trust God’s definition of the good. Instead, they sought to define their own good, which ended very badly. But, as Jesus taught, we can know “the good” if we return to God, the source of all good.

Thus far, we have considered Jesus’ insistence on defining the good in relation to God and viewing God’s intention in creation as the paradigm by which we should assess our thoughts and actions. So, what would it look like to make such an assessment in light of these truths about creation?

We need to bring our thoughts and actions into submission to God’s will as He has revealed it in creation. Doing so helps us evaluate

CREATION: *“And It Was Very Good”*

the thoughts and actions that are prevalent within our society. For instance, when assessing whether a public policy regarding the environment or marriage is good, we should ask questions like, “How would this policy promote the flourishing of creation as God intended?” or “How does this policy promote the stability and sanctity of marriage between one man and one woman for life as God intended?”

As Christians, while we acknowledge that sin has corrupted the whole world, we also recognize that such corruption has not erased the ideals embedded within creation. As Jesus’ example with the Pharisees reveals, while concessions in a fallen world might be made at certain points and even be part of our traditions, God’s ideal for humanity remains. And it is very good.



In the next chapter, we’ll continue with our theological framework to understand what has gone wrong with God’s very good creation. We’re going to see what this all has to do with sexuality.

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