

*A Reflection on The Nashville Statement and Transgenderism:  
On Creation, Revelation, and the Meaning of Male and Female*

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### **Introduction**

The subject of transgender identity is overturning long-held conceptions on what it means to be male and female, and posing a formidable challenge to biblical anthropology in the process. From Hollywood to debates over non-discrimination statutes in public policy, proponents of transgenderism are making comprehensive claims. Because male and female embodiment are woven so deeply into the fabric of human existence and human society, the undoing of the male-female binary risks countless repercussions in society. We are left asking: How can the identity of male or female be established when reduced to psychology? It is in this cultural moment and in the face of mounting pressure to conform to society's standards for what defines male and female that the Nashville Statement attempted to offer a "clear, counter-cultural witness" to the secular world.

The aim of this paper is to explore the Nashville Statement's articles on transgenderism by referencing articles 4, 5, 6, 7, and 10. This paper will argue that the Nashville Statement's articles bear faithful witness to biblical Christianity's teaching on human embodiment, and furthermore, that Christianity's teaching on the "divinely ordained differences" of males and females offer a more compelling foundation and witness for understanding contemporary debates on gender and human embodiment.

With reference to "design" language utilized nine times and "creation" utilized five times throughout the preamble and articles, the paper will examine the identity of maleness and femaleness in relationship to biblical revelation and general revelation. It will argue that the Nashville Statement's understanding of General Revelation (implicating both biology and natural law teleology) and Special Revelation provides a substantive account for biological and reproductive design being integral components for constituting male and female identity.

### **The Abolition of Humanity**

In the ensuing aftermath of the announcement that the Trump administration was drafting a "memo" to define sex on biological markers, the *New York Times* published an article by science journalist Denise Grady titled "Anatomy Does Not

Determine Gender, Experts Say.”<sup>1</sup> In the article, Grady extensively quotes from only one source, Dr. Joshua D. Safer, an endocrinologist and executive director of the Center for Transgender Medicine and Surgery at Mount Sinai Health System in New York. He is also president of the United States Professional Association of Transgender Health.

In the lede of the article, readers are told that defining one’s sex based on biology is “oversimplified and often medically meaningless.” But when asked about what determines gender identity—whether one is male or female—Safer is left speculating. It’s biological in some capacity, he grants, but he cannot say for sure. All that’s left to define one’s gender identity is their “identity”—“a person’s powerful, core knowledge of who they are.” It’s worth noting that the ambiguity of Dr. Safer’s argument is only exceeded by the disagreement among transgender voices on whether any biological component is necessary at all.<sup>2</sup>

What conclusion does the reader draw from the article? One of the world’s foremost experts confidently dismisses the timeless truth that sex and gender identity are chromosomal and embodied realities while admitting that no one knows how or where gender identity originates in full; or for that matter, what constitutes male or female. This admission means, of course, that humanity is left with no stable definition of itself. This fact is omitted, but is urgently germane to the debate at hand. The lack of stable definitions for male and female highlights one of the most problematic implications of the transgender movement—the abolition of humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> Denise Grady, “Anatomy Does Not Determine Gender, Experts Say,” *New York Times*, October 22, 2018, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/22/health/transgender-trump-biology.html?smtyp=cur&smid=tw-nytimescience&login=email&auth=login-email>

<sup>2</sup> There are two main camps espousing a basis for gender identity. There are biological theorists who put gender identity within the arena of biology (e.g., “brain-sex theory”) and constructivists who see gender identity as purely a matter of self-description. For an example of the latter, see Sophie Searcy, “Why We Don’t Need Brain Scans to Confirm Trans People are Trans,” *Them*, May 31, 2018, available at: <https://www.them.us/story/brain-scans-transgender-identity>. Searcy writes: “Trans brain research and its recent coverage seek to measure trans people according to a cis standard — a standard that is itself a debunked fiction originally created by publication bias. The legitimacy of trans identities does not hinge on whether or not trans brains look like cis brains. We don’t need brain scans that cost thousands of dollars to legitimize or diagnose trans people; if we inform children about trans identities and remove stigmas that keep trans people marginalized, we can already validate the genders of trans kids free of cost simply by asking them who they are. See also Alex Barasch, “Biology is Not Destiny: Seeking a Scientific Explanation for Transgender Identity Could Do More Harm Than Good,” *Washington Post*, June 27, 2018, available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/06/27/feature/seeking-a-scientific-explanation-for-trans-identity-could-do-more-harm-than-good/?utm\\_term=.ff8810ffa63c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/06/27/feature/seeking-a-scientific-explanation-for-trans-identity-could-do-more-harm-than-good/?utm_term=.ff8810ffa63c)

All we're left with, then, for determining what constitutes a male or female, is what UCLA sociologist Rogers Brubaker argues is the "asserted objectivity of subjective identity that makes it possible to defend choice in the name of the unchosen and change in the name of the unchanging."<sup>3</sup> To be clear, this degree of subjectivity is relativistic and incoherent because it makes human identity endlessly revisionist.

### **The Nashville Statement: A Path Forward**

As biblical scholar Richard Bauckham has written, "biblical commands are not arbitrary decrees but correspond to the way the world is and will be."<sup>4</sup> Into the void created by transgenderism's challenge to anthropology, and echoing Bauckham's quote above, the Nashville Statement enters. In the absence of a substantive definition for male and female identity by mainstream transgender theorists, the Nashville Statement offers a working proposal in accordance with the witness of Special and General revelation.

The Nashville Statement is a Christian document, but it is also, foundationally, a creational document. As ethicist Bernd Wannewetsch writes, "The Christian doctrine of creation is precisely such a way of explaining why there are aspects of reality that are invested with normative moral significance."<sup>5</sup> What I mean by this, is that the Nashville Statement's articles are not strictly sectarian. The articles are not built on fideistic decrees or fiat. Instead, the articles of the Nashville Statement speak to created reality—because the Lord Jesus reigns over creation and unites both creation and redemption in His gospel.<sup>6</sup> They do not require an exclusively Christian epistemology for their authority or intelligibility, but insofar as sin warps human perception, the articles do require explanation in line with the full drama of Christian doctrine.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 7.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom: Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 70.

<sup>5</sup> Bernd Wannewetsch, "Creation and Ethics: On the Legitimacy and Limitation of Appeals to 'Nature' in Christian Moral Reasoning," in *Within the Love of God: Essays on the Doctrine of God in Honour of Paul S. Fiddes*, ed. Anthony Clarke and Andrew Moore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 209.

<sup>6</sup> For further reference on how Jesus' unites both "creation ethics" and "Kingdom ethics," see Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Wannewetsch helps relate the domain of creation to the domain of redemption: "Christ restores by helping those who after the Fall have to live 'natural lives' to re-connect with the divine purpose of all creation so as to become what they have been destined for in the beginning." Wannewetsch, "Creation and Ethics," 210.

I want to briefly describe what the Nashville Statement is arguing in Articles 4, 5, 6, 7, 10.

#### Article 4

*WE AFFIRM that divinely ordained differences between male and female reflect God's original creation design and are meant for human good and human flourishing.*

*WE DENY that such differences are a result of the Fall or are a tragedy to be overcome.*

Article 4 argues that the male-female binary is the archetypal pattern for all of creation and essential for the proper ordering of individual and communal life.

#### Article 5

*WE AFFIRM that the differences between male and female reproductive structures are integral to God's design for self-conception as male or female.*

*WE DENY that physical anomalies or psychological conditions nullify the God-appointed link between biological sex and self-conception as male or female.*

Because of the commands to be fruitful, multiply and exercise dominion through the one-flesh union established in Genesis, central to male-female identity is their ability to fulfill this command. Biblically speaking, the ability to fulfill this command is established on reproductive grounds. I will further argue that this is established on natural law grounds as well. By natural law, I follow David Van Drunen's understanding that natural law is less an "epistemological theory" but as the revelation of God's will in creation, or as an objective natural moral order that God has made known to all human beings."<sup>8</sup> To this end, natural law is an outworking of creation theology.

#### Article 6

*WE AFFIRM that those born with a physical disorder of sex development are created in the image of God and have dignity and worth equal to all other image-bearers. They are acknowledged by our Lord Jesus in his words about "eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb." With all others they are welcome as faithful followers of Jesus Christ and should embrace their biological sex insofar as it may be known.*

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<sup>8</sup> David VanDrunen, "Natural Law for Reformed Theology: A Proposal for Contemporary Reappropriation," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 9, no. 2 (2015): 118–19, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697312-00902018>.

*WE DENY that ambiguities related to a person's biological sex render one incapable of living a fruitful life in joyful obedience to Christ.*

Article 6 establishes that disorders of sex development, or "Intersex" conditions are known realities; and that these deviations or privations from the archetypal pattern do not nullify or vitiate the biblical-creational pattern, nor do they establish a "third" or spectrumented human species.

#### Article 7

*WE AFFIRM that self-conception as male or female should be defined by God's holy purposes in creation and redemption as revealed in Scripture.*

*WE DENY that adopting a homosexual or transgender self-conception is consistent with God's holy purposes in creation and redemption.*

Article 7, importantly, grounds the male-female binary not within the arena of human psychology or expressive individualism, but in creation and redemption. "Adopting" is not simply describing one's self as same-sex attracted or afflicted with gender dysphoria, but is finding some type of normative identity in these experiences. Article 7 demonstrates the authoritative interplay between creational reality and Scriptural command.

#### Article 10

*WE AFFIRM that it is sinful to approve of homosexual immorality or transgenderism and that such approval constitutes an essential departure from Christian faithfulness and witness.*

*WE DENY that the approval of homosexual immorality or transgenderism is a matter of moral indifference about which otherwise faithful Christians should agree to disagree.*

Article 10 argues that adopting a position that considers homosexual immorality and transgenderism as morally praiseworthy identities or practices are at odds with Scriptural authority and incompatible with orthodoxy.

In the above articles, the Nashville Statement is basing its claims not only the authority of Scripture, but on the intelligibility of creation.

### **Towards a Christian Definition of Male and Female**

My argument in this section is that the Nashville Statement provides a substantive and coherent account for defining male and female identity because it comports with what is true of human nature and human design. It does this chiefly

because the Bible speaks of the male-female binary on both Special Revelation and General Revelation grounds simultaneously.<sup>9</sup> As I will argue, the Special Revelation binary in Scripture possesses the same teleology of the binary of General Revelation and natural law. This identical teleology reflects the Scripture's authority. Fearing that I am driving too deep a wedge in my use of natural law from Special Revelation, I agree with Matthew Levering, who observes that the "Bible itself suggests that natural law can only be properly understood in light of natural law's divine origin."<sup>10</sup> Dennis Johnson establishes how General Revelation reflects divine action:

The book of nature, general revelation, includes the evidence of vitality and design in the original creative acts through which the Creator's wisdom and power still shine. Its order and causation bear witness to the divine providence that continues to sustain and regulate the heavens, the earth, the sea, and all that fills them.<sup>11</sup>

I want to establish two presuppositions as backdrops to this section. First, the Bible affirms the truth of an objective, enduring male-female binary; and second, the presence of this gender binary is made on creational and teleological grounds; that is, it is not based on pragmatism, coincidence, sentimentality, or emotivism.

The teleology of the male-female Special Revelation binary has three component parts. First, God made humanity in His image. This is the source of our dignity, and the image of God has relational, structural, and functional implications. Second, God designed humanity in the form of male and female counterparts. This binary is objective, universal, intelligible, and differentiated (e.g., primary and secondary sex characteristics). Third, God designed male and female for one another in a complementary, exclusive, and permanent relationship.

Speaking even more specifically, what does it mean, creationally and biblically, to define male and female as is contained in the Nashville Statement? It means that the

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<sup>9</sup> I want to express my thanks to my friend Casey Hough for forcing me to clarify my thoughts in this section.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Levering, *Biblical Natural Law: A Theocentric and Teleological Approach* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 26. In the view presented in this paper, natural law is derivative of General Revelation. Later, Levering helpfully articulates the importance of reclaiming natural law: "Reclaiming natural law within its biblical context—creation and redemption, love and law—thus holds out hope for the human creature by affirming, once again, the central aspect of natural law, namely its participation in God's eternal law by which God draws us to himself." Levering, *Biblical Natural Law*, 233.

<sup>11</sup> Dennis E. Johnson, "Between Two Worlds: Worldview and Observation in the Use of General Revelation to Interpret Scripture and Vice Versa," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 1 (March 1998): 75.

binary present in Special Revelation is identical to the General Revelation binary (i.e., “creation”). Natural law ethics helps explain the unity of both Special and General Revelation.

According to natural law scholar Ryan T. Anderson, “Sex, in terms of male or female, is identified by the organization of the organism for sexually reproductive acts. Sex as a status—male or female—is a recognition of the organization of a body that has the ability to engage in sex as an act.”<sup>12</sup> Anderson’s use of “organization” is crucial. Similarly, according to Robert P. George, “Sex is constituted by our basic biological organization with respect to reproductive functioning; it is an inherent part of what and who we are.”<sup>13</sup> Not only does reproduction factor centrally in this definition, it plumbs an even deeper foundation: Genetic reality. According to Siddhartha Mukherjee in his book, *The Gene: An Intimate History*, biological sex and gender identity travel together. As Mukherjee writes, “It is now clear that genes are vastly more influential than virtually any other force in shaping sex identity and gender identity.”<sup>14</sup> According to the natural law tradition, then, the identity of something is determined by its purpose and it is into this reality that the Nashville Statement aims to speak.

Anderson’s research above is adduced from an extensive report written by Johns Hopkins psychiatrist Paul McHugh and Lawrence S. Meyer, looking at the field of scholarly research around sexual orientation and gender identity. Their findings suggested that academic literature which argues that gender identity is distinct from biological sex does not provide sufficient evidence to verify that claim. In response, they offered important insights into why basing male-female identity on biological and reproductive design provides a “stable” conceptual basis. According to McHugh and Mayer,

The underlying basis of maleness and femaleness is the distinction between the reproductive roles of the sexes; in mammals such as humans, the female gestates offspring and the male impregnates the female. More universally, the male of the species fertilizes the egg cells provided by the female of the species. This conceptual basis for sex roles is binary and stable, and allows us to distinguish males from females on the grounds of their reproductive systems, even when these individuals exhibit behaviors that are not typical of males or females.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ryan T. Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment* (New York: Encounter, 2018), 79.

<sup>13</sup> Robert P. George, “Gnostic Liberalism,” *First Things*, December 2016, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Siddhartha Mukherjee, *The Gene: An Intimate History* (New York: Scribner, 2017), 366.

<sup>15</sup> Lawrence S. Mayer and Paul R. McHugh, *Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Science*, Special Report, *New Atlantis* 50 (Fall 2016), 89.

In the above definition, male and female are not culturally-constructed. They are defined by their identity, and their identity by what each is ordered to.

McHugh and Meyer go on to show how biological function relates to ontological status:

In biology, an organism is male or female if it is structured to perform one of the respective roles in reproduction. This definition does not require any arbitrary measurable or quantifiable physical characteristics or behaviors; it requires understanding the reproductive system and the reproduction process. Different animals have different reproductive systems, but sexual reproduction occurs when the sex cells from the male and female of the species come together to form newly fertilized embryos. It is these reproductive roles that provide the conceptual basis for the differentiation of animals into the biological categories of male and female. There is no other widely accepted biological classification for the sexes.<sup>16</sup>

The above definitions are, strictly speaking, biological in nature, in that each refers back to the reproductive organization of the sexes as the primary characteristic for distinguishing sex difference. Notice that Mayer and McHugh note that these distinctions are “binary and stable,” which implies that a definition of man and woman apart from biological and reproductive organization is on shaky ground, which, incidentally, is the outcome of most arguments advanced by transgender advocates.

I want to argue that the above definitions parallel with the creation account of man and woman revealed in Genesis 1:26-28. Notice that the creation of man and woman in Genesis both is structural and dynamic. As male and female beings made in God’s image, their design is ordered toward a particular purpose—filling the earth, subduing it, exercising dominion. More specifically, that purpose is accomplished by male and female design—that the act of being fruitful and multiplying hinges on, and springs from, their respective sex distinction. In this account, general revelation parallels with special revelation. As each of us knows, sex makes babies, and this reality is exclusive to only one reality: Male-female complementarity.

What, in conclusion, is happening in the description of male and female offered in the Nashville Statement? It argues that the biblical narrative around Genesis 1 and 2 explains categorically, thematically, and observationally what biology confirms as

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 90.

reality—that maleness and femaleness are biological realities ordered by their reproductive organization. While scholars distinguish Special Revelation from General Revelation, the creation account of man and woman demonstrate one area where revelation is on a unified plane.

Articles 4 speaks of “divinely ordained differences” in male and female and Article 5 speaks of this difference of as vividly manifested in the “reproductive structure” and thus reproductive organization of male and female. In this, the Nashville Statement is unifying the planes of theology and biology.

This means a biblical view of what defines a man and woman must be defined according to God’s design in creation: A man and woman are an image bearer of God whose biological design is oriented to fulfill a creational mandate of subduing creation by his and her covenantal marriage union with their sexual counterpart.

Two caveats about this. First, this definition still applies to those who are unmarried. Why? Because regardless of whether a man or a woman is married, they still possess a bodily design oriented to reproduction. A man and woman are more than their reproductive anatomy, but never less. Second, this definition still applies to those who are infertile or who may experience a disorder of sex development (DSD). Because, again, every male or female is a participant in the larger order of creation, assigned with the general task of responsible dominion and stewardship by virtue of their existence as male or female. This is true regardless of whether this occurs in the context of marriage, and regardless of whether reproduction is ever fulfilled. Moreover, a deviation from an otherwise enduring norm is a privation of a good; and a privation does not nullify or vitiate the basic norm that, as a general observation of the male and female sexes, the two are ordered toward procreation.

## Conclusion

Commenting on the obsession with identity, Francis Fukuyama argues that the endless quest for subjective identity, over time, fractures society’s collective need for stability:

Human beings are intensely social creatures whose emotional inclinations drive them to want to conform to the norms surrounding them. When a stable, shared moral horizon disappears is replaced by a cacophony of competing value systems, the vast majority of people do not rejoice at their newfound freedom of

choice. Rather, they feel an intense insecurity and alienation because they do not know who their true self is.<sup>17</sup>

The Christian response to such a reality means that Christian ethics have the postlapsarian responsibility to explain creation and nature to a world whose fallen natures refuse to believe the truth about itself and who fail to properly interpret the world's design in the fullness of God's revelation (John 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col 1:15-17).<sup>18</sup> It is a truth-telling act. Society and government should not play fast and loose with its most basic constituency—people. Humanity is not elastic. We are male or female, and no specious “spectrum” argument or endless obsession with “identity” nullifies this truth. Law ought to reflect the truth about human nature and not capitulate to the demands of what ethicist Oliver O'Donovan calls “psychological positivists”—those who would create reality based on psychological perception alone.<sup>19</sup>

No social, hormonal, cosmetic, or surgical augmentation can countermand the male-female binary. As the Psalmist declares in Psalm 100:3, “It is he who made us, and we are his.” This truth means that no activist or surgeon can suppress human nature, that we cannot run from ourselves without, eventually, human nature striking back.

As I write about in my book, *God and the Transgender Debate*, the issue lurking beneath the surface of debates around gender and sexuality is whether we as human beings have the ability to redefine what it means to be human. Are we self-sovereigns capable of razing our bodies to the ground for the sake of self-supremacy? Are we the Creator? Or, are we creations? Are there limits imposed on us by genetic mapping overseen by a wise God?

Society may try to ignore, downplay, or subvert the male-female binary, but it will never overturn it. That's because our createdness as male and female is stamped onto human nature (Gen. 1:26-27). We may try, but individuals will never be able to transcend the limits of their embodiment. This is a biblical truth insofar as there is chapter and verse to back up this claim. It's also a truth of creation itself, born witness in the enduring binary that cultures have embraced and lived in accordance with. It's to this end that the Nashville Statement speaks.

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<sup>17</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 56.

<sup>18</sup> Wannewetsch, “Creation and Ethics,” 212.

<sup>19</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 112.

There is no cogent argument from transgender theorists that should convince you that someone's self-declaration about their gender actually witnesses to something ontologically true. The transgender worldview is one of speculation. It makes no sense to say that one's gender identity is fixed but that gender is also on a spectrum. There is no way to authenticate someone's "feminine" or "masculine" feelings are truly masculine or feminine apart from their embodiment. Of course, as Christians, we understand this world is broken by sin, and disorder ensues from living in a world that Romans 8 declares is "groaning." This means we have more compassion, empathy, and hope than what society can offer those struggling with their internal sense of gender. But compassion and empathy do not equate to affirmation of transgender identities.

I want to conclude by quoting from the conclusion of the Nashville Statement's preamble because it arrives at the purpose of the Nashville Statement—to give glory to God, the inscrutable, ineffable, all-wise God who acts in creation: "To forget our Creator is to forget who we are, for he made us for himself. And we cannot know ourselves truly without truly knowing him who made us. We did not make ourselves. We are not our own. Our true identity, as male and female persons, is given by God. It is not only foolish, but hopeless, to try to make ourselves what God did not create us to be."