

**OTHERING, ICON, AND PARTICULARITY:
INTER-GENDER RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CHURCH**

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ABSTRACT

The use of harmful language, whether overtly or covertly, that labels a person as “the other” is becoming increasingly less tolerated in our Western society. This sort of “othering” unto exclusion, as Miroslav Volf has argued, is fundamentally contrary to the teachings of the Christian tradition and ought to be rejected. However, another form of “othering,” when detangled from destructive uses like xenophobia, racism, sexism, and the like, can work differently. Anthony Thiselton argues that the author of 1 Corinthians, particularly in chapter 11:2-16, is concerned with respecting the “otherness of the other” in the corporate gathering. In line with this thought process, this paper argues for distinct difference between men and women as the logic for a necessary *turning toward* one another in contemporary church life. Instead of otherness causing distance, otherness demands a *drawing near* in the form of meaningful relationships, an aspect that constitutes the very fabric of the body of Christ.

This paper explores two case studies as examples of destructive “othering” that have perpetuated separation between genders: a look at the history of interpretation of the woman at the well account in John 4, and modern-day exploitative uses of the female form through pornography and its ecclesial effects. The paper then turns to two proposed practices for virtuous “othering” that necessitate a *drawing near* movement enabled by the Spirit whose work is that which turns men and women toward Trinity and one another. The first practice, challenging as it may be for Protestant traditions, is shifting our gaze to “whatever is pure, whatever is lovely” (Phil. 4:8) with the aid of icons or holy images to form, what I call, a thriving “iconomy.” The

second virtuous othering practice is found within the resources of post-supersessionist theology which, in its critique of replacement theology, helps us see that diminishing particularity or worse, replacing one group with another, is harmful and contrary to the Spirit's work. A theology and practice of virtuous othering allows for meaningful inter-gender relationships fragrant with God's cosmic vision for the church embodying God's image in the world.

INTRODUCTION

We find in the Genesis creation narrative, the triune God bringing forth a man and a woman as the first of a community of image bearers who would evidence God in the context of both their togetherness and their particularity. This inaugural community-making event was a seed of what would grow and blossom in many iterations throughout human history into collectives of people who would image their Creator through hearts full of worship toward YHWH and relationships of love and meaning with one another. At least, this has always been the God-dream; a dream that started in a garden and ends in a city, a dream of a woman and a man in a Presence-drenched shalom in their union and their otherness, wrapped up together in the Father-Son-Spirit rhythm of drawing near, resting upon, abiding within; a world without separation between the other. Such a vision of human flourishing is a vision for the world in general, but equally a vision that is the hope of the living organism we call the church, made up of women and men who collectively image God together as ligaments and appendages in the anatomy of Christ's body. And yet, we would need to go far from home to find evidence for the ways the church finds herself missing the mark, missing her vocation to live into what Daniela Augustine calls the formation of "Christ's body on earth as communal icon of God."¹

¹ Daniela Augustine, "Image, Spirit, and Theosis: Imaging God in an Image-Distorting World," in *The Image of God in an Image Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 175.

While we might identify many failings of the modern Western church, one of the infamous fault lines that has persisted as a place of fracturing is the *turning away* one from another between men and women.² After all, if God is that which turns toward the other, which I propose here, then wedges of separation that push men and women away from one another work in a God-less direction. Willie Jennings is so bold to say: “the crucial theological problem of life in community [is] how men and women see each other in a fallen world.”³ Such a phenomenon occurs when the beauty of the “otherness of the other”⁴ is exchanged for a damaging othering that, at best, maintains distance, and at worst, spawns destruction. (I define distance as that which we manufacture to insulate ourselves from “the other,” often out of fear but sometimes out of disinterest; a disinterest built upon a failed assumption that one can be human apart from “the other.”) Destructive forms of othering, both overt and covert, even such othering that masks as virtuous, has caused a *turning away* movement between genders in the church.

The many stories featuring the misuse of power and sexual scandals, especially in ecclesial contexts in the West, have added to the murkiness and difficulty of relationships between women and men in our shared common life.⁵ Yet, it fits within the creation narrative and the overarching story of God in Scripture, that humans do not thrive in separation. Some even go

² This is perhaps a good place to note that I am approaching the topic from the assumption that most of the time in conservative Evangelical churches, we categorize each other as men and women. For this reason, I do not reference groups like non-binary or genderqueer people in this paper who would otherwise be mentioned in the context of broader social spheres and for whom sincere consideration ought to be given but is beyond the scope of this paper.

³ Willie Jennings, “The Desire of the Church,” in *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove, IL: IVP; Leicester, England: Apollos, 2005), 235-6.

⁴ This term is borrowed from Anthony Thiselton when he says in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 that “[i]t would be impossible for a man (and a woman) to glory in the otherness of the other if gender differentiation were reduced so that ‘the other’ became ‘the same’...Paul insists that true human relationality entails otherness and indeed respect for the otherness of the other as a necessary basis for true reciprocity, mutuality, and relationality that constitutes what it is to be human” (emphasis original). See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text, New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 836, 842-3.

⁵ The exclusion and embrace concept is taken from M. Volf. See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019).

as far to say that humans do not exist in separation. African theologian John Pobee says, “I exist because I belong to a family.”⁶ Nozomu Miyahira, drawing concepts from the rice-growing culture in Japan, says that in his context “humans are viewed not just as individual beings but also as beings living ‘between’ others.” Miyahira expands this idea by citing psychiatrist Kimura Bin who says that “a self becomes aware of itself when it meets what is not itself.”⁷ From yet another tradition, Eastern Orthodox scholar David Bentley Hart puts it this way:

There is no such thing as a person in separation. Personhood... is not a condition possible for an isolated substance. It is an act, not a thing, and it is achieved only in and through a history of relations with others. We are finite beings in a state of becoming, and in us there is nothing that is not action, dynamism, an emergence into a fuller (or a retreat into a more impoverished) existence.⁸

Separation⁹ in its many iterations is the enemy of humanity, be it fractured relationships between one another, enmity with God, or death; separation runs fundamentally contrary to what it means to be human. Yet, when we are met with the face of the gendered-other, we often allow separation to persist as though it were the right way to behave in the face of otherness. For instance, we see this phenomenon at work when a man will not invite a woman into a shared leadership role, because her gender could make her a sexual temptation. The fear of the otherness of the other drives distance in the name of “wisdom”, but the belief under the surface is deeper and deeply consequential. That is the errant belief that we do not actually need one another. As Jennings suggests: “We [men and women] refuse to believe we actually need each other to know ourselves.”¹⁰ Often, it is the strangeness of the gendered other that constrains us to guarded and

⁶ John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville, Abington: 1979), 49; Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 99, n. 4.

⁷ Nozomu Miyahira, *Towards a Theology of the Concord of God: A Japanese Perspective on the Trinity* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000). 115, 117.

⁸ David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale, 2019), 153.

⁹ I use “separation” and “distance” synonymously throughout. The same definition I used for “distance” can be applied here. See parenthetical definition on pg. 3.

¹⁰ Jennings, “The Desire of the Church,” 248.

artificial ways of being in the context of inter-gender relationships, as though we can afford to carry on in anything less than meaningful relationships with each other. But indeed, we cannot.

Destructive othering, examples of which we will turn to shortly, drives men and women in the church apart, working precisely against the work of the Spirit whose movement is one that turns us toward Trinity and one another. Yet whether we acknowledge it or not, the lives of women and men are wrapped up in one another in a glorious intertwining that was never made to be untangled. The apostle Paul said it this way in 1 Corinthians 11:11-12, “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.” It may be that the extent to which “the other” is odd to us is precisely the extent to which we have need of them.

In this paper, I explore the question: can men and women live into the vision of God for meaningful and healthy relationships in the church? I answer this question by employing a theological classification method of “othering” that distinguishes between the (destructive) othering that works against a *turning toward* movement between genders and the (virtuous) othering that syncs with the rhythm of the Spirit whose life is one that turns men and women toward Trinity and one another. I first offer two admittedly cursory surveys of destructive othering examples that hinder relationship. Then, the answer to my research question turns toward a hopeful tenor with two proposed practices for virtuous othering that, I hope, can contribute to a path forward for flourishing mixed-gender relationships in the church. Through the theological distinguishing of these types of othering, I demonstrate that othering is not inherently problematic. To the contrary, it is precisely otherness and othering, when understood with virtue ethics in mind, that is required and needed for a flourishing common life together across gender lines.

DESTRUCTIVE OTHERING

Destructive Othering Case Study #1 History of Interpretation of the Woman at the Well

First, we turn to a case study of destructive othering drawing from a Biblical example in John chapter 4. You know the story: Jesus, weary from his journey is resting at Jacob's well in Samaria when a woman comes to fetch water, a noticeably unusual time considering it was the peak of the day's heat—perhaps a clue that this woman is an outcast in her community and not able to come with the other women in the morning hours. Jesus and the woman enter into a conversation, certainly taboo considering she was a Samaritan and he a Jew. After a request for water which turns into an explanation of the living water Jesus can provide, Jesus says to the woman, "Go, call your husband to come here," to which the woman replies, "I have no husband," trying to avoid revealing "the tragic nature of her sinful life."¹¹ The woman, who we now understand has had a tattered sexual past, acknowledges Jesus as a prophet when he tells her he knows she has had five husbands and is currently living with a man to whom she is not married. The story ends redemptively for the Samaritan woman, as she leaves her water jug to go tell the community about the man who told her everything she ever did: the town's loose woman turned into a vessel for God's use.

Well, this is perhaps the way you have heard the story told. In fact, several phrases from this telling draw from historical interpretations, which have filled in the gaps of the text in a particular way about the woman at the well. Maybe you have heard the story or told the story a bit differently having done study in the area of marriage, remarriage, and divorce in the world of

¹¹ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, vol. 25A, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 205–6.

Jesus such as: the duty of men to marry the widow of their deceased brother by Levirate marriage (perhaps as many as five times over was not unattested considering Mark 12:19-22),¹² the divorce laws that permitted only the husband to issue a bill of divorce whether for barrenness or any reason that might displease him¹³ (the only exception being cases where a woman had a male advocate¹⁴), and the general social context of an honor/shame society for which marriage was critical for survival for women.¹⁵

With those realities in mind, another telling of the story might go something like this: Jesus is weary during his journey from Judea to Galilee. His disciples go to town to get food, while Jesus rests at Jacob's well there in Samaria; after all it is one of the warmer parts of the day. At that time, a woman (we'll call her Photina) comes to fetch water, and Jesus asks her for a drink. They begin to engage in conversation. Photina is hesitant at first considering the Jew-Samaritan dynamic. Unlike the midnight meeting just a chapter ago with Nicodemus, the conversation occurs in the light of midday and spans a breadth of deeply theological discussion. Jesus eventually says to the woman, "Go, call your husband to come here," to which Photina replies, "I have no husband." Jesus can perceive the sadness in her voice. He already knows through divine insight her story. She has been married five different times. As readers, we are not told what caused the five marriages to end, but it is possible that one or more husbands died, or that one or more divorced her. Jesus does not rebuke Photina but acknowledges her truth telling. "You are right in saying 'I have no husband;' you have had five husbands, and the one you now

¹² Alaa Quassasfa (علاء قصاصفة), "A Historical Perspective on the Samaritan Woman in John," *Bethlehem Bible College* (blog),

<https://bethbc.edu/acblog/2021/02/23/a-historical-perspective-on-the-samaritan-woman-in-john-4-by-alaa-qasasfa/>.

¹³ Angela Nevitt Meyer, "The Woman at the Well," *Challenging Theology*, Dec 8, 2014, <https://medium.com/positive-theology/the-woman-at-the-well-the-radical-revelation-of-john-4-1-42-7aa3470f1b18>.

¹⁴ Lynn Cohick, "The Real Woman at the Well," *Christianity Today*, no. 8 (October 2015): 68, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/october/was-samaritan-woman-really-adulteress.html>.

¹⁵ "Photini: Mother of Evangelists," *Know Your Mothers*, <https://knowyourmothers.com/photini-mother-of-evangelists/>.

have is not your husband. What you have said is true.” She acknowledges his prophetic insight and enters into further theologically robust conversation about worship and place. At the end of conversation, she leaves her water jug and goes to tell her community about Jesus, and they come to Jesus and believe.

If you did not grow up in the Eastern Orthodox or Catholic tradition, Photina may not be a name with which you are familiar. Medieval hagiography offers the name Photina, which means “enlightened one,” and a post-conversion story which ends in martyrdom for preaching the gospel; some traditions say a death by being thrown down a dry well.¹⁶ Whether her name was truly Photina or something else, the tradition reminds us of a necessary fact: **the Samaritan woman at the well had a name**. I will retain the name Photina here, in an effort to lift up the way in which maintaining a character’s namelessness makes it convenient as interpreters to objectify this very character. Because what I’d like to draw attention to in this brief survey of interpretive history is the way in which labeling and name-calling functions as a mechanism of destructive othering in John 4 and elsewhere.

Throughout the history of interpretation, particularly from the Reformation onward, we see a more disparaging choice of labels for Photina.¹⁷ In his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, John Calvin notes how remarkable it is that Christ would reveal truth to “this wretched woman.”¹⁸ How astonishing, he says, that she would go from “being a prostitute” to “suddenly a

¹⁶ Craig S. Farmer, “Changing Images of the Samaritan Woman in Early Reformed Commentaries on John,” *Church History* 63, no. 3 (Sept 1996): 371, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3169935>.

¹⁷ Though many patristic and medieval interpreters refuse destructive name-calling, there are portions of interpretation that need reconsideration in light of what historians tell us about marriage, remarriage, divorce, and cohabitating in antiquity. For further reading see Craig S. Farmer, “Changing Images of the Samaritan Woman in Early Reformed Commentaries on John,” *Church History* 63, no. 3 (Sept 1996): 365-75; Warren Carter, “John,” in *T&T Clark Social Identity Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Aaron Kuecker (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 169-210; Janeth Norfleete Day, *The Woman at the Well: Interpretation of John 4:1-42 in Retrospect and Prospect* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

¹⁸ John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 147–8.

disciple of the Son of God.”¹⁹ Of course, there’s no mention of prostitution here, but many of us have heard these sorts of characterizations. Yet how does Calvin explain these five marriages, particularly considering the fact that women in antiquity did not typically have the agency to initiate divorce. “The reason of this,” Calvin writes, “probably was, that, being a froward (contrarian) and disobedient wife, she constrained her husbands to divorce her.” He goes on to say, “Though God joined thee to lawful husbands, thou didst not cease to sin, until, rendered infamous by numerous divorces, thou prostitutedst thyself to fornication.”²⁰

In the 17th century, Cornelius à Lapide follows suit with Calvin. His name of choice: “harlot,” with a caveat that the woman should not be considered an adulteress unless her current lover is married, in which case both are guilty.²¹ Matthew Henry, in his early 18th-century commentary on the whole Bible, offers his contribution. For Henry, the name “maid” or “widow” are not accurate labels for Photina; instead they are labels she would have hoped to be given had she successfully evaded the specifics in the conversation with Jesus.²² It was her “scandalous practices... her undutiful, unclean, disloyal conduct, [that] had provoked them to divorce her, or by indirect means, contrary to law, [she had] divorced them.”²³ Turning to the 19th century, New Testament scholar Caryn Reeder draws attention to D.L. Moody’s use of the story during his ministry in Chicago in the mid-to-late 1800’s.²⁴ For Moody, the men he ministered to were often *victims* of prostitutes and harlots. Photina is conveniently labeled “prostitute” in his telling of the story.²⁵ In the 20th century, the interpretations include: G.H.C MacGregor’s “flippant” woman

¹⁹ Calvin and Pringle, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, 147–8.

²⁰ Calvin and Pringle, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, 147-53.

²¹ Cornelius a Lapide, John 4:17, Catena Bible, <https://catenabible.com/com/5838d8f6205c248f42e52128>.

²² Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1936.

²³ Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1936.

²⁴ Caryn Reeder, *The Samaritan Woman’s Story: Reconsidering John 4 After #ChurchToo* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2022), 68-9.

²⁵ Reeder, *The Samaritan Woman’s Story*, 68-9.

whose “shady side of her own life” Jesus confronts²⁶; Roger L. Fredrikson’s woman who “lived with a passing parade of men;”²⁷ D.A. Carson’s “unschooled, without influence, despised, capable only of folk religion... moral outcast”²⁸ of a woman; and Andreas Köstenberger’s “serial fornicator.”²⁹

There is much more as it relates to the history of interpretation of the central character of John 4:1-42, and if time allowed we could look at the many other interpretive approaches from the allegorical interpretations of the Fathers like Origen and Augustine, the wisdom and virtue attributed to the woman by the likes of Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia, the Medieval hagiographers who wrote the name and story of Photina (the mother of evangelists), up to contemporary interpreters who have helped us rethink our lens and read more honestly and virtuously such as AJ Levine, Lynn Cohick, Angela N. Parker, Craig Farmer, Jo Ann Davidson, Caryn Reeder, Teresa Okure, Roberta Hestenes, Luise Schottroff, and Janeth Norfleete Day. Yet what we find in the sampling of interpretive history from the Reformation through modern day is a case study for the ways othering works: the ways we, as interpreters, read situations between men and women and the ways we make assumptions about the text and its characters. Divorced five times—she must be promiscuous, a threat to her community. Whether divorced five times, widowed five times, or a combination of both, many interpreters have spent time speculating on her culpability, while missing the reality that we need not speculate over, and that is the reality of trauma in her story.³⁰ Rather than, divorced five times—how promiscuous and threatening she

²⁶ G.H.C. MacGregor, *The Moffatt New Testament Commentary: The Gospel of John* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1952), 101.

²⁷ Roger L. Fredrikson, *The Communicator’s Commentary: John*, ed. Lloyd J. Ogilvie (Waco: Word, 1985), 99.

²⁸ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids: IVP Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 216.

²⁹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 152-3.

³⁰ For more on the topic of trauma and shame, see Angela Parker’s work on John 4 through the lens of a womanist hermeneutic. See Angela N. Parker, “‘And the word became . . . gossip?’ Unhinging the Samaritan

is—another interpretive lens might consider it differently. Divorced five times—how discarded and abandoned she might feel. This is perhaps an appropriate way to imagine the emotion within the scene considering the historical context and the fact that Jesus does not seem to treat her as a deviant (i.e., we do not see the attested “go and sin no more” line here), but rather as a truth-teller. Even in her willingness to disclose her current cohabitating situation, she is a worthy dialogue partner for theological discussion and, in the closing scene, a trustworthy evangelist.³¹ While the male disciples leave their fishing nets to follow Jesus, Photina leaves her watering jug to share the gospel.

What is at stake here with these tellings of the central character in this story? Of course, we find many layers of othering inherent to the story. Jesus is a Jew, Photina a Samaritan. Jesus is a rabbi, Photina a townsperson. Jesus is a man, Photina a woman. The dynamics of “the other” are not problematic, except when leveraged inappropriately. I would like to propose that the othering we find among many of the aforementioned cast of interpreters is a destructive othering that reveals something about the way we understand inter-gender interactions and relationships. Luise Schottroff notes this destructive othering this way: “The special female variant is characterized by the assumption that, in the case of women, the failures in their lives are connected with their sexuality.”³² Despite having the longest recorded conversation with Jesus in the New Testament (interestingly a conversation that is alone with a woman), the woman, divorced five times, is labeled promiscuous and a threat to her community.

woman in the age of #MeToo,” *Review & Expositor* 117, no. 2 (June 2020): 259–271, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637320928113>.

³¹ The note that Jesus does not treat the woman like a sinner is drawn from Angela Nevitt Meyer. See her article “The Woman at the Well,” *Challenging Theology*, Dec 8, 2014, <https://medium.com/positive-theology/the-woman-at-the-well-the-radical-revelation-of-john-4-1-42-7aa3470f1b18>.

³² Luise Schottroff, “The Samaritan Woman and the Notion of Sexuality in the Fourth Gospel” in *“What Is John?”: Volume II: Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 164-5.

This case of destructive othering, I argue, can have modern implications for relations in the church that unfairly categorize and separate men and women. We live in a moment where fear largely categorizes the interactions between women and men in the church. Perhaps taking a look at our interpretive approach here in this text can be a starting point to re-capture a vision for mixed-gender relationships in our contexts today, particularly in light of a Jesus who did not play by Billy Graham's rules. Let's turn now to one other example of destructive othering.

Destructive Othering Case Study #2

Exploitative Use of the Female Form in Pornography & Its Ecclesial Effects

According to a 2019 report, Pornhub recorded an average of 115 million visits per day. That works out to be a total of 42 billion visits per year.³³ A 2014 Barna study showed 97% of Christian men have viewed pornography, with 64% viewing it at least monthly, and 37% viewing several times a week.³⁴ According to the study, these stats nearly mirror the national average in general.³⁵ Barna also found 87% of Christian women say they have watched porn, with 33% of women aged 25 and under searching for porn at least once a month. When a group of pastors were asked via survey, 57% of them said porn addiction is the most damaging issue in their congregation; 69% said porn has adversely impacted the church.³⁶

³³ Gemma Mestre-Bach, Gretchen R. Blycker, and Marc N. Potenza, "Pornography Use in the Setting of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* 9, no. 2 (June 2020): 181-3. <https://doi.org/10.1556/2006.2020.00015>.

³⁴ Proven Men by Barna Group, "Pornography Survey" (2014), http://www.provenmen.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Survey-eBook-no-links-Linked.pdf?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Thanks+for+downloading&utm_campaign=Porn+Survey&vgo_ee=wurXrS2oydipiWpyFlfyYBwUnRnlmwiuCIJkd9A7F3A%3D.

³⁵ Joe Carter notes that the survey can give the wrong impression considering some of these Christian men who are surveyed are nominal Christians, not "born again" Christians. Though I take Carter's point, I include the survey results here without caveat assuming that these Christians, both nominal and born again are in our churches and are in inter-gender relationships. See Joe Carter, "FactChecker: Do Christian Men Watch More Pornography?," *The Gospel Coalition*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-do-christian-men-watch-more-pornography/>.

³⁶ Barna Group, *The Porn Phenomenon: The Impact of Pornography in the Digital Age* (Ventura, CA: Josh McDowell Ministry: 2016).

Alongside these statistics, there is a fair amount of research and scholarship on the effects of this multibillion-dollar industry including how regular use of pornography affects the brain, how it impacts dating relationships and marriages, and how it impacts one's sexuality. Gary Wilson, in his book *Your Brain on Porn: Internet Pornography and the Emerging Science of Addiction*, sheds light on the way porn use affects brain plasticity, sexual functioning, and dopamine levels.³⁷ Deepak Reju and Jonathan D. Holmes, both pastors of counseling, speak to the power of porn to isolate: "Pornography pulls an addict away from the very thing he or she needs—God's wisdom available through God's people."³⁸ While many resources and scholarly publications exist on these topics related to pornography, little attention has been given to how pornography affects non-romantic relationships between women and men. How does the exploitative use of the female form in pornography bear on our regular patterns of embodied knowing of one another in mixed-gender relationships?

In our viewing of one another in mixed-gender relationships, pornography perpetuates a problem of the gaze.³⁹ God's vision for a holy reverence in beholding the "otherness of the other" is sabotaged the moment a body is met with an objectifying gaze.⁴⁰ Pornography is inherently void of authentic relationship, be it between the actors and the viewer, or between actors themselves. Even the best attempts at an "ethically-sourced porn"⁴¹ still reduce women strictly to

³⁷ Gary Wilson, *Your Brain on Porn: Internet Pornography and the Emerging Science of Addiction* (UK: Commonwealth Publishing, 2014).

³⁸ Deepak Reju and Jonathan D. Holmes, *Rescue Plan: Charting a Course to Restore Prisoners of Pornography* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2021), 520.

³⁹ The language of "a gaze problem" is built upon J. Brian Tucker, "Anthropology" (lecture, Moody Theological Seminary, Plymouth, MI, January 14, 2020).

⁴⁰ Having only recently realized how my writing and speaking is often littered with ableist language, I acknowledge the reality that this conversation prioritizes discussions around sight and vision. For those who are sight-impaired, the notion of "the gaze" and issues related to sight may perhaps be exclusionary. Yet, my connection with the thought-life and Philippians 4:8 below, I hope, draws a critical connection with the ways in which imagination even apart from eyesight is a critical part of how othering, both destructive and virtuous, plays out.

⁴¹ See William B. Bowes and Alejandra Fontecha-Bowes, "Is There Such a Thing as Ethical Porn?," in "The Problem of Porn: Women, Men, Intimacy, and the Church", *Mutuality* (Autumn 2022), 15, https://www.cbeinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/FINAL_29.3WEB.pdf. Compare with Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*:

sexualized agents, or worse, to sexualized objects, portrayed as willingly and pleasurably enduring forms of sexual violence.⁴² The exploitation of the female form in pornography tells its viewers, both women and men, that what it means to be a woman in the context of relationship with a man is measured in one way: her usefulness. (Note, the issue of usefulness is a problem the other way as well considering the ways in which women can objectify men through pornography use or in consumption of erotica, etc.) Particularly though, for women, much pornography plays into the usefulness factor of what the woman can do for the man, be it the man on the screen or the man through the screen. Writers for the secular anti-porn organization “Fight the New Drug,” argue that pornography leads to viewing people as products.⁴³ Here we find a case of destructive othering in some of its most severe forms.

This form of destructive othering has significant effects on relations between men and women in the church. Beth Felker Jones is right when she says, “the doctrine of the human being in the image of God undoes the commodification of human bodies.”⁴⁴ Through porn consumption, instead of seeing one another as fellow image bearers, we become relevant to one another only to the extent that we are useful to one another. As Eastern Orthodox scholar John Zizioulas comments in his work *Communion and Othering*, “[w]e accept the other only in so far as he or she does not threaten our privacy or in so far as he or she is useful for our individual

A Sexual Reformation (New York: Convergent Books, 2019). See also “Porn,” *The Liturgists Podcast*, October 3, 2019, <https://theliturgists.com/porn-podcast-page/> where Mike McHargue discusses ethical uses of porn.

⁴² Different sources offer conflicting statistics on the proliferation sexual violence in porn. The variance is likely attributed to one’s definition of sexual violence and what constitutes it. Matt Fradd states that violence in porn occurs on an average of one act of aggression every minute and a half. See Fradd, *The Porn Myth: Exposing the Reality Behind the Fantasy of Pornography* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 113. Ana Bridges notes that some statistics are almost completely opposite, stating only 1.9% of porn is sexual violence. However, Bridges argues with this sort of classification is that if the recipient reacts positively, it is not considered violent. See Bridges et al., “Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best-Selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update,” *Violence Against Women* 16, no. 10 (October 2010): pp. 1065-1085, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801210382866>

⁴³ “How Porn Can Normalize Sexual Objectification,” *Fight the New Drug*, accessed November 5, 2022, <https://fightthenewdrug.org/how-porn-can-normalize-sexual-objectification/>.

⁴⁴ Beth Felker Jones, “Witnessing in Freedom: Resisting Commodification of the Image,” in *The Image of God in an Image Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 227.

happiness.”⁴⁵ In the case of pornography, porn use does not just remain in the realm of fantasy; its effects flow out into relationships in ecclesial contexts.⁴⁶ The gaze problem, perpetuated by pornography, is a prime culprit in keeping men and women from turning toward one another in God-honoring, Spirit-driven relationships.

The impact on the gaze manifests itself in our churches along gender lines. One ecclesial example is when men and women relate in ministry contexts only to the extent in which it is absolutely necessary; that is, only to the extent in which it is marked by usefulness, a far cry from the vision of women and men imaging God together through meaningful and healthy relationship. Another ecclesial example comes through within church leadership contexts. Heather Matthews notes the scenario in which “a male pastor will not invite a woman into a shared leadership role when he sees her as a sexual temptation.”⁴⁷ In some circles, the male pastor might be applauded by others for his prudence. This shows how even virtuous attempts at addressing the gaze problem often still lead to something of a double harm for women: first, the objectification as sexualized objects (as seen in pornography) and second, the penalizing of women by exclusion due to said objectification.

In the examples of Photina in John 4 and pornography in our contemporary context, I have attempted to demonstrate the implications for how destructive othering drives men and women in the church apart, working precisely against the work of the Spirit whose movement is one that turns us toward Trinity and one another. Such othering has made the valleys of separation feel necessary, even applauded, for the ways they protect us from one another. What’s

⁴⁵ John. D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London, New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 1.

⁴⁶ See Matt Fradd, *The Porn Myth: Exposing the Reality Behind the Fantasy of Pornography* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 136.

⁴⁷ Heather Matthews, “Church Leaders and Porn: The Devastating Effects for Women in the Church,” in “The Problem of Porn: Women, Men, Intimacy, and the Church”, *Mutuality* (Autumn 2022), 21, https://www.cbeinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/FINAL_29.3WEB.pdf.

at stake when we work from a belief that says the otherness of the other is a threat to our flourishing? What's at stake is the vision of God for the life of the church. We see this in the ways we have settled for minimal and surface-level relationships. When God said it is not good for man to be alone and then brought forth Eve, such a statement was the emphatic declaration of the non-goodness of aloneness.⁴⁸ Without one another, we live in a state of not-good-ness. But together, in the particularity of our gender otherness, we live into God's vision as we walk together in mixed gender partnership. With that vision in mind, we turn our attention to the sort of othering that is needed: virtuous othering.

VIRTUOUS OTHERING

Virtuous Othering Practice #1 Building a Thriving "Iconomy": Shifting the Gaze

In his article "The Desire of the Church," Jennings names the way in which we have disrupted divine desire since the time of the garden. "We disrupted God's walk with us. Within this terrible reality we find the disruption between male and female." In the context of the scene of Genesis 3, says Jennings, "[t]he relationship male and female is no longer seen as the revitalization of our humanity. The relationship will not be seen as life-giving and life-sustaining. Rather the relationship will be a constant struggle, navigating relations of power."⁴⁹ Jennings calls for the reordering of desire in the face of the gendered social structure of sin that has separated women and men and has seldom been considered despite its prolific and destructive nature.

⁴⁸ I argue that the focus here was not marriage. Space does not allow for a thorough explication of an argument, but in short, considering the life of singleness in which both Jesus and Paul led, God was not saying it is not good for a human to be unmarried but rather the focus was on the problem of isolation and loneliness.

⁴⁹ Jennings, "The Desire of the Church," 240.

As I've already highlighted in the case study of pornography, destructive othering can thrive where desire and images meet. Seemingly, both desire and images have the potent potential to turn men and women away from one another, which thus raises pertinent questions as to what to do with them. Regarding desire, can it be sanctified or is desire between genders inherently sexualized? Regarding images, can images be utilized to turn genders back toward one another, or do we need a modern iconoclasm of sorts to proceed? I'd like to answer both questions in the affirmative—that is: yes, desire can be sanctified and yes, images can serve the church in turning women and men toward one another. Challenging as it may be for some Protestant traditions, I'd like to expand upon what Jennings proposes concerning images in the task of what I call “building a thriving iconomy.”

The human gaze has an appetite for beauty. Yet despite Dostoevsky's enigmatic confession that beauty will save the world, it is dubious whether many of us believe in the transformational power of beauty. God's creatures, having been made to coalesce (albeit in their distinct identities) into a beauty that St. Paul calls “the manifold wisdom of God,”⁵⁰ were born out of nothing more or less than the Trinity's delight. And yet the language and experience of holy delight and beauty often evade us. As Hans Urs von Balthasar articulates in his reflections on aesthetics over 60 years ago: “We no longer dare to believe in beauty and we make of it a mere appearance in order the more easily to dispose of it. Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness...”⁵¹

Today, the average adult in America spends 7 hours and 4 minutes looking at a screen each day.⁵² Though some of this time may be screen-reading, many of us are inundated, not

⁵⁰ Ephesians 3:10, NIV.

⁵¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit: Eine Theologisch ästhetik: Schau der Gestalt* (Freiburg, Germany: Johannes, 1988); Quote taken from English version *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Vol. 1: Seeing the Form* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 18.

⁵² Josh Howart, “Alarming Average Screen Time Statistics (2022),” *Exploding Topics*, Sept. 21, 2022, <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/screen-time-stats>.

merely with words in the digital space but also with images. The seduction of screens and digital images finds its genesis in a deep-seated appetite for beauty. We find a vision for a life captivated by beauty in Philippians 4:8. Here, Paul invites his hearers into a virtuous thought-life, one marked by the meditation on “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” The Greek word λογίζομαι translated “think” can connote to ponder, to consider, to let one’s mind dwell upon.⁵³ Here, I propose the God-vision for meaningful and necessary relationships between men and women, ones marked by genuine friendship and delight in one another, can be facilitated through building a thriving iconomy, an economy of holy icons. The use of icons, or what Jennings calls “cleansing images,” can aid us in a necessary othering that is marked by virtue.⁵⁴

On the first Sunday of Lent in the Eastern Orthodox church, Orthodox Christians sing that the icon of the incarnate Christ is “the safeguard of the orthodox faith.”⁵⁵ The icon, for the Orthodox, is considered the eternal language of the church. If pornography is a visual profane language—a refusal to see the image of God in another human (usually a woman)—then holy icons are a visual sacred language, shifting our gaze toward beauty and what is holy. The former is an example of the type of images that ought to be smashed to bits in necessary iconoclastic ceremonies of our intrapersonal and interpersonal lives. The latter, however, is a reference to the holy icons that are to be cherished, the sort of images that open before us windows to a transcendent heaven while simultaneously reminding us of the immanent God who interacts in a world of materials, wood, art, stone, and bodies. According to Eve Tibbs, the icon both reveals a

⁵³ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 598.

⁵⁴ Jennings, “The Desire of the Church,” 249.

⁵⁵ *The Lenten Triiodo*, trans. Mother Mary & Archim. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware (South Canaan, PA: STS, 1994), 300.

divine reality and participates in the reality it presents.⁵⁶ A healthy iconomy has the power to course-correct distorted desire and draw us into God and one another.

Though Protestants have approached icons with understandable concern considering the icon's misuse as an object of worship, icons were not intended to be an ultimate end in themselves. Icons point us to something far more extraordinary, something they cannot fully capture in paint and wood. As Natalie Carnes explains, "the power of images also arises from what they do not make present—from a type of absence they do not dispel."⁵⁷ In my view, the use of icons at their best does two things. First, icons engage the field of vision in such a way that captures one's imagination unto worship of the Father, Son, and Spirit, reawakening one to the wonder and beauty of the God who is "wholly other—than another."⁵⁸ Icons shift the gaze from the profane to the holy. The second is much like the first: icons remind us of the *imago dei*. They train us how to see people. For Ian McFarland, icons "protest against the materialist reduction of the person to the body, as though the body were nothing more than an object for our manipulation and consummation," while also "challeng[ing] the dualist view of the body as a more-or-less accidental container for the person."⁵⁹ In icons of Jesus and saints, we see their personhood and we see ours. This is where we remember what the Church Fathers regularly noted—that human beings too are icons, made in God's image (Gk. *eikon*). As our imaginations are sanctified by beauty, we see icon and community intersect and we regard the other (even the

⁵⁶ Eve Tibbs, *A Basic Guide to Eastern Orthodox Theology: Introducing Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), 51-2.

⁵⁷ Natalie Carnes, *Image and Presence: A Christological Reflection on Iconoclasm and Iconophilia* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

⁵⁸ A phrase attributed to Abbe Jules Monchanin. Quoted in Henri A.G. Blocher, "God and the Scripture Writers: The Question of Double Authorship," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 539.

⁵⁹ Ian McFarland, "What Does It Mean to See Someone? Icons and Identity," in *The Image of God in an Image Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 170.

gendered other) rightly. We find a community built on a thriving iconomy where love of God and love of neighbor thrives.

So, what does a community built on a thriving iconomy look like? It is a mixed-gender community that beholds the holy icon of the trinity in perpetual admiration, dwelling on whatever is true, and honorable, and just, and pure, and lovely, and excellent, and praise-worthy. In so doing, the otherness of the other across gender lines is recognized for what it is—the necessary other for the imaging of God together. A community built on a thriving iconomy is the community that lives into its own vocation as the communal icon of God in its turning toward one another, men and women. Daniela Augustine says it this way:

God gives his face to Adam and Eve so that—individually and collectively—they may become his icon within the cosmos. Thus, the depositing of the divine image within the human being becomes the mystical mark of his or her priming for communion and community with God and with one another. Through the agency of the Holy Spirit, this communion makes humans partakers in the divine life and nature.⁶⁰

A thriving iconomy displaces destructive othering in all its forms: exclusion, exploitation, separation, dismissal. A thriving iconomy allows beauty to play its role; that is, instead of isolating women and men, beauty's lure pulls us near to one another.⁶¹ A thriving iconomy is not steeped in the fear of bodies different from one's own, but rather catches the divine vision for a community of image-bearers who portray God to the extent that their difference is embraced and deemed necessary. In the way Andrei Rublev's *The Trinity* or Ivanka Demchuk's *Transfiguration* speak of a greater reality, a thriving iconomy tells a story far more beautiful than the ones we often live into or tell ourselves. A thriving iconomy is a worshipful act of drawing near to all that is beautiful, including colors and art and bodies—all that points us to God. Jürgen Moltmann

⁶⁰ Augustine, "Image, Spirit, and Theosis," 176.

⁶¹ For more on beauty's ability to join people by way of decentering, see Ashish Varma, "Beauty: Life in the Face of Another," *BHG* 2 (2022): 56-63.

writes: “When I love God I love the beauty of bodies, the rhythm of movements, the shining of eyes, the embraces, the feelings, the scents, the sounds of all this protean creation.”⁶²

A thriving iconomy sees the gendered other and glorifies God and welcomes them in with hospitality, not only for their sake but also for the sake of the one welcoming. As Amos Yong reminds us, the Christian mission is our being wrapped up in participation with God in His hospitality.⁶³ A thriving iconomy in our churches is more than an aesthetic soul-transforming experience guided by viewing icons, though it is certainly not less than that. This iconomy surpasses what holy art painted or carved can do. St. Gregory of Nyssa says the brilliance of the book of Ecclesiastes is the way it “trains [our] desire to long for what is beyond appearance, beyond the grasp of senses.”⁶⁴ With the help of artistic renderings, a thriving iconomy in our ecclesial contexts leads us further into sanctified imaginations where desire is transformed and where faces and bodies of women and men become rightly regarded as participants in an economy of human icons evincing the multi-faceted beauty of Trinity together.

Virtuous Othering Practice #2

Embracing Particularity with Assistance from Post-Supersessionist Theology

We turn now to the second virtuous othering practice for inter-gender relationships in the church. Miroslav Volf has identified exclusion in its different forms: elimination, domination, abandonment, and assimilation. The latter, while seemingly the milder of the types, is in effect as equally potent as the others in the way it excludes. The voice of exclusion by assimilation says, “if you become like me, then you’ll have a place here.” This voice is the very voice

⁶² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 98.

⁶³ Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 131.

⁶⁴ Martin Laird, “Under Solomon’s Tutelage: The Education of Desire in the *Homilies of the Song of Songs*,” *Modern Theology* 18, no. 4 (2002), 507-25, as cited in Chris E.W. Green, *All Things Beautiful: An Aesthetic Christology* (Waco: Baylor, 2021), 29.

post-supersessionist⁶⁵ theologians have spotted and exposed in replacement theology and its many corollaries. The word “supersession” at its most fundamental level means “to sit on top of,” conveying the idea of one entity sitting upon or superseding another, thereby overshadowing it, engulfing it, or conflating what once was two distinct entities into one. Supersessionism in a theological context speaks to the ideology that claims the Church replaces Israel and is one that can be identified since the early church and continues to be a dominant view in much of the church today. Supersessionism shows up in an ecclesiology that claims the church is the “new Israel,” “the one new people of God,” or a new “third race.” Replacement theology positions the church on center stage, discontinuing the covenant to ancient Israel. In a supersessionist framework, Israel has little relevance except for perhaps references to it in strictly spiritual terms. The distinctions of Israel, its land, its people, and its identity are laid aside in the name of a new Israel, a new testament, a new covenant, etc. Post-supersessionism confronts this by problematizing the anti-Jewish seeds sown in and through replacement theology with an emphasis on the issue of non-particularity, a troublesome ingredient in the supersessionist theological package.

One academic group that does work in this area is the Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology. The society, whose founding members include R. Kendall Soulen, Holly Taylor Coolman, J. Brian Tucker, Gerald McDermott, Craig Keener, Stanley Hauerwas, Willie Jennings, Katherine Sonderegger, and others, promotes research and discussion with the purpose of

⁶⁵ Post-supersessionism is differentiated from non-supersessionism in the way it refers to a theological framework that comes out of ecclesiological contexts that were once proponents of supersessionism, which is critical to acknowledge in a post-Shoah context. In other words, this is a theological viewpoint emerging “after supersessionism,” hence the “post-” prefix. See R. Kendall Soulen, “Post-Supersessionism,” in *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. Edward Kessler and Neil Wenborn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 350. The use of “anti-supersessionism” can also be probative in this context, particularly as it relates to the necessity of maintaining distinction when confronting destructive othering. See Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, “Towards an Anti-Supersessionist Theology: Race, Whiteness, and Covenant,” *Religions* 13, no. 2 (2022): 129, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020129>.

emphasizing the distinction of the Jewish people and curtailing the teaching that suggests the abrogation or obsolescence of God's covenant with the Jewish people.⁶⁶ Kendall Soulen defines post-supersessionist theology as a theology that "affirms the present validity of God's covenant with Israel as a coherent and indispensable part of the larger body of Christian teaching."⁶⁷ In a post-Shoah context where anti-Semitism manages to continue to persist, many have been willing to reconsider their theologies and interpretive lenses. The resources within post-supersessionism offer much for consideration; one of its key resources—particularity.

I have argued to this point that othering is not a problem, barring destructive forms of othering. To the contrary, it is the othering of the other within the context of inter-gender relationships in the church that ought to persist in order for women and men to live into God's desire for the beauty of the church in its optimal and flourishing life. Germane to this conversation is the preservation and exaltation of particularity, which is of primary import in post-supersessionist theology. In the context of Jewish identity, post-supersessionist scholars have rightly opposed a church-replacing-Israel mentality, a Paul-leaving-his-Jewishness interpretation, a spiritualization-of-Jewish-bodies-and-Jewish-land approach.

Supersessionism, when not guarded against, can also sneak into our Christology. Christ cannot be rightly understood apart from his maleness, his Jewishness, or the soil of ancient Israel from which he was formed. The male, circumcised, Jewish flesh of the incarnate Jesus Christ serves as an example of such particularity. As Cherith Fee Nordling has reminded us time and again, the bodily ascension means that Christ ever lives as a human being despite what a

⁶⁶ Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology: Jewish-Christian Relations, <http://spostst.org>.

⁶⁷ Soulen, "Post-Supersessionism," in *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations*, 350-1. Note, Soulen provides a caveat which distinguishes post-supersessionism from dispensationalism: "[P]ost-supersessionism should be distinguished from the views of dispensationalist Christian movements that originated in the 19th century and continue to enjoy widespread popularity today, even though these latter also affirm in some fashion the present validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people."

Gnostic-informed imagination might lead us to believe.⁶⁸ Far from an androgynous spiritual being, the Christian tradition holds that the ascended Jesus maintains his particularity in his gender and ethnicity, leaving no place for the obsolescence of such identity markers. In fact, a Christology that erases Jesus's particularity is no Christology at all.

The byproducts of supersessionism can also leak into our theological anthropology. Particularity is integral to how humans embody the *imago dei*. Willie Jennings and others draw attention to how a compromise in the area of particularity can lead to this sort of thinking in other areas like race.⁶⁹ Replacement theology and its corollaries, without thoughtful care, have the capacity to acquiesce to the obsolescence of Jewish particularity, Jewish identity, and Jewish soil—a displacement and assimilation found at the roots of societal evils such as colonization and subjugation of peoples. Post-supersessionism reminds us that particularity reflects the Acts 17:26 reality that God “made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation.”⁷⁰ From the soil of the human-making event in Genesis until now, divine wisdom has providentially guided the specific geographic locations, milieu, time frames, ethnicity, and gender of people. In such fashion, the human in their distinctive identities and particularities is an exhibition of the divine. This is relevant for the soil we come from. It is also relevant for the genders we embody.

⁶⁸ See Cherith Fee Nordling, “Ascension, Communion, and the Hospitality of the Priest-King,” in *Come, Let Us Eat Together: Sacraments and Christian Unity*, ed. George Kalantzis and Marc Cortez (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018); Cherith Fee Nordling, “The Necessity of the Ascension of Christ,” interview with Bradley Jersak, December 8, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-gB7hbGfs>; Cherith Fee Nordling, “Embodied, Human, Sexual: The Only Way to Be Christian,” *Reformed Journal* (blog), November 15, 2007, <https://reformedjournal.com/embodied-human-sexual-the-only-way-to-be-christian/>.

⁶⁹ See Willie Jennings, Gerald McDermott, and Daniel Lee, “Supersessionism, Nations, and Race,” (paper presented at the 2021 annual meeting of The Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology, Virtual, November 19, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDIFvKAGGTo>; see Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁷⁰ NASB 1977 version.

To experience thriving relationships between women and men in the church, particularity need not be set aside but embraced. While some may point to Galatians 3:28 to downplay gender particularity, this is a misapplication of a powerful and relevant text. Rather than a case for some sort of “gender-blindness,” Paul’s words provide a necessary and bold confrontation to the ways in which oppressive power structures harm people based on race, gender, class, etc. It is though Paul is emphatically declaring that no amount of destructive othering can keep us from one another in Christ. The otherness of the other, be it Jew and Gentile or male and female, necessitates a *drawing near* movement while avoiding a theology that says one ought to supersede the other.

It is a natural tendency in human communities to draw near to those we share commonalities with, those who look like us. We become closer friends with others to the extent that we embody sameness and only in spite of the ways we embody difference. Yet, those who do work in intercultural development have helped us consider how leaning into difference actually moves us toward adaptation, which is the highest level of inter-cultural sophistication.⁷¹ Post-supersessionist theology helps us see that downplaying difference, or worse—replacing one group with another—is harmful and contrary to the plan of God. Instead of harmful othering, post-supersessionism provides an example of the virtuous othering that celebrates difference. Such celebration of difference calls for a weighty hospitality, which, in the context of inter-gender relationships, draws us closer even in our particularity.

⁷¹ The Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) is a research-proven and data-driven assessment that plots someone along an inter-cultural continuum ranging from denial to polarization to minimization to acceptance to adaptation. See Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), <https://idiinventory.com/>.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that women and men in meaningful relationship together is what is needed for community flourishing in the church. I have framed this through the lens of othering, looking first at two examples of destructive othering in the interpretation of Photina in John 4 and the use of pornography in our contemporary context. Further research on destructive othering might consider case studies such as: an analysis of messaging from popular culture including modern beauty standards, the impact of “purity culture” in Western evangelical ecclesial contexts, and hermeneutical approaches that lead to hierarchicalism. Subsequently, I argued for two practices for virtuous othering: the building of a thriving iconomy and the use of post-supersessionism’s resources for embracing particularly. An extended version of this project could look at other virtuous othering practices which could include examples like: encountering the other at the communion table, mining the resources of trinitarian theology especially from non-Western perspectives (e.g., Miyahira’s three betweennesses and one concord⁷²), and practicing a Pentecost orientation that challenges assumptions about in what ways and through whom the Spirit will move (e.g. Amos Yong’s “pneumatological imagination”⁷³).

To be clear, my goal here has not been to write a practical guide for pastors and ministry leaders on how to cultivate meaningful relationships between men and women in the church, but rather, to cast a vision for the beauty of such relationships in God’s cosmic plan and design for the church and the world. I realize that, for some, this paper may land as merely theoretical and entirely too idealistic. In an attempt to provide a brief “so what” (that is most certainly the preacher in me!), my concluding comments come by way of four suggested applications as an

⁷² Miyahira, *Towards a Theology of the Concord of God*, 112.

⁷³ A conception used throughout much of Yong’s works, an example being Amos Yong, *The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science and Divine Action in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination*, Pentecostal Manifestos 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

attempt at offering a more overtly pragmatic contribution to the conversation. Admittedly not fully formed and certainly not comprehensive, I close with these exhortations for inter-gender relationships in church contexts:

1. **Honor Billy Graham but forsake his rule.** The peculiar aspect of the implementation of the BGR as a policy in some churches today is that Billy Graham's ministry was not in a local church. While perhaps wise in the context of the life of a traveling evangelist, his rule of not being alone with women, checking hotel rooms before entering, etc. was not implemented from the vocation of pastor, shepherd, ministry leader, or church member.⁷⁴ Yet in an age of sexual scandal and clergy abuse, would not the BGR be helpful in the local church? I want to say that these diabolical abuses in the church, especially the experiences of victims, ought to be front and center in our ecclesial dialogue. Corruption, deviance, secrecy, and oppression must be named, exposed, and exorcized from our church communities. Yet, it is not the Billy Graham Rule that will walk us into restoration of virtuous othering. Cheeky as it may sound, Karen Swallow Prior's statement captures precisely why we should leave it behind: "Virtue ethics is better than the Billy Graham rule."⁷⁵ Perhaps in trying to ensure we do not cross lines when it comes to male-female relationships, we've missed out on the invitation to participate in the Holy Spirit's work to transcend the division between the gendered other. It is healthy for local churches to take time to interrogate policies and perhaps create new ones. If a rule centers

⁷⁴ See more insights in Courtney Powell, "How Can I Think About the Billy Graham Rule?" *Faith and Work* (blog), The Gospel Coalition, March 5, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/billy-graham-rule/>.

⁷⁵ Karen Swallow Prior, "The Problem with 'Don't Eat Alone with Women': Good Character is Better than Strict Rules," *Vox Media*, April 1, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2017/4/1/15142744/mike-pence-billy-graham-rule>.

on how to avoid one another, it is likely not serving the church well. Work to cultivate a culture informed by an imagination of how to draw near to one another.

2. **Challenge structures of separation.** If the argument of this paper is at all convincing that women and men in meaningful relationships is necessary for a thriving common life together, then we ought to take an inventory of the efficacy of structures in our churches and ministries to that end. For instance, do our leadership teams cultivate a *drawing near* movement between genders? Or are the leadership structures built upon and thus perpetuating the belief that we need generous levels of separation between one another? What about our all-female or all-male gender ministry spaces? As an active member in a women's ministry myself, I am not criticizing these spaces, but rather suggesting we be mindful of gender-homogenous meetings and groups and how they function in our churches. Indeed some conversations are most advantageous in gender-homogenous spaces and do not necessarily lead to separation across gender lines. However, if meaningful conversations are only happening in gender-exclusive spaces, the structures ought to be challenged. This perhaps is most salient for the women and men leading the church in vocational and lay capacities. The late Gordon Fee said it this way:

The New Testament evidence is that the Holy Spirit is gender inclusive, gifting both men and women, and thus potentially setting the whole body free for all the parts to minister and in various ways to give leadership to the others... it is a Spirit agenda, a plea for the releasing of the Spirit from our strictures and structures so that the church might minister to itself and to the world more effectively.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Gordon D. Fee, "The Priority of Spirit Gifting for Church Ministry," in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, Gordon D. Fee (Leicester: IVP Academic, 2005), 254.

3. **Check our idols at the door, especially the idol of marriage.** God's vision for women and men from both the creation narrative and the New Testament is not strictly a vision for marriages.⁷⁷ From the celibacy of the one who showed us how to be human (Christ) to the bold words of St. Paul in his appeal concerning the benefits of being unmarried (1 Cor. 7), living a life of singleness is leading a life no less complete than a life of marriage. While marriage is worthy of celebration for the beauty of its union, churches, if not carefully monitored, can become breeding ground for marriage-idolatry. When family values are conflated with Christ's teachings, church cultures can begin to lose sight of certain teachings, certain patterns of embodiment, and certain people, namely single people who boast significant numbers in our congregations. According to a 2017 Barna study, singles make up roughly a quarter of our churches on average.⁷⁸ The necessity of the otherness of the other across gender lines is hardly restricted to married couples. The church would do well to find ways to honor the contribution of single men and women. The real work is to live into virtuous othering practices that turn us toward one another, women and men, whether one be single, married, divorced, or widowed. Checking our marriage idols at the door may mean being wary of the prioritization of married couples within leadership predicated simply upon their being married. And, it certainly means inviting singles to the table in ministry contexts, meals together, leadership, conducting service, etc.

⁷⁷ Regarding 1 Corinthians 11:11-12, J. Brian Tucker and John Koessler note, "[T]he interdependence between male and female that Paul describes... is not limited to those who happen to be married. Paul's emphasis on the interdependence of the sexes to the Corinthians indicates that it applies to the church as much as it does to the rest of society." See J. Brian Tucker and John Koessler, *All Together Different: Upholding the Church's Unity While Honoring our Individual Identities* (Chicago: Moody, 2018), 158.

⁷⁸ Barna Group, "A Single-Minded Church," Family and Kids (blog), *Barna Group Organization*, February 9, 2017, [https://www.barna.com/single-minded-church/#:~:text=You%20probably%20already%20know%20this,churchgoers%20are%20single%20\(23%25\)](https://www.barna.com/single-minded-church/#:~:text=You%20probably%20already%20know%20this,churchgoers%20are%20single%20(23%25)).

4. **Stop being useful.** Find ways to turn toward one another in ways that are not necessitated by usefulness. Rather than reaching out to the administrative person when you need the logistical run-down, invite them for lunch and talk about anything but logistics. This doesn't mean men and women refrain from accomplishing the tasks at hand, it just means that is not the only time they interact and spend time together. To build meaningful inter-gender relationships, two things must occur: people must be known, and they must be delighted in. How often do you laugh with someone of a different gender apart from a significant other? Do you know the hobbies, favorite foods, the names of the pets of that woman/man in your small group, your ministry context, your leadership team? Much of moving beyond destructive othering into an othering that is virtuous happens when our relationships are not strictly predicated on our usefulness to one another. Relationships built on usefulness are person-object relationships, relationships built on transactions, relationships that are dispensable once the task or talent is no longer needed. Relationships built on usefulness are no relationships at all. Thriving, meaningful relationships are built on a foundation that says, "I have need of you, not for how you are useful to me, but because my humanity requires your humanity." The problem of the not-good-ness of man's aloneness is not solved in a robotic assistant, but in a living, breathing, co-creating woman. So, stop building inter-gender relationships motivated by usefulness; build friendship. Laugh with and delight in one another by knowing one another, not just knowing what you can do for one another.

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