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THE RESTORATION OF PERSONHOOD

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Many of those reading this article will have had the honor of knowing the late Dr. Dennis Kinlaw, former professor here at the Seminary, two-time president of Asbury University, and the founder of the Francis Asbury Society. He was gifted with a keen theological mind, and there are certainly hundreds of men and women throughout the larger Wesleyan world who count him as a mentor. I had the privilege of knowing Dr. Kinlaw during the last eight years of his life. I would go by and see him, and we would talk about theology and about the challenges in serving as president of these two historic institutions. One afternoon I was visiting the esteemed Old Testament scholar just a year before he passed away. I asked him: What is the most important theological issue facing the church today? He smiled and quietly laughed with that signature twinkle in his eye, and then he said

just one word, “Personhood.” Personhood. The central question of this article is: Why might personhood be the most important

theological issue we are facing today?

This notion of personhood was raised in a more graphic and pointed way in the first sentence of Carl Trueman’s 2020 landmark mark, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. He opens his book like this: “The origins of this book lie in

my curiosity about how and why a particular statement has become regarded as coherent and meaningful: ‘I am a woman trapped in a man’s body.’”¹ This sentence to our grandparents would appear to be nothing less than nonsensical gibberish, but today it is not only regarded as a meaningful, authentic statement, but as Trueman points out, to deny such a statement today is to be regarded as stupid, immoral, or subject to some irrational phobia. Why is that? As theological students, it is vital that you are able to look beneath the presenting issues of our day—whether it be transgenderism, the deep divisions in our society, or any other—and understand and perceive the deeper issues at play. That is what a theological education is for. There is a classic line in Sherlock Holmes where Watson is amazed at Holmes’ ability to deduce things and Sherlock Holmes famously says to Watson, “You see, but you do not observe.”² As future leaders of the church, it is not enough simply to see what is going on in our culture and around the world, we must observe, i.e., we must come to understand deeply what gives rise to all that is happening in our day. At the heart of this statement put forth by Trueman—“I am a woman trapped in a man’s body”—and dozens of similar statements emerging across the cultural landscape in our day is the unspoken issue

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1 Trueman, 19.

2 Doyle, 2.

of personhood and the very nature of how the self is understood in late modernity.

This is an academic paper, not a sermon. There are huge pastoral implications that lay beneath the challenges we are facing that call for a profound pastoral response. However, before a pastoral response can be set forth, we must first understand the landscape and seek to identify the underlying problem. Only then can we effectively explore the pastoral implications and outline an ecclesial response for effective and loving pastoral care in the real and challenging world of the church and the larger society. This is primarily a descriptive article—seeking to understand what is happening historically. A pastoral response will necessarily call for a whole range of prescriptive solutions, which lay beyond the purpose of this paper. In a broad way, let me say that every church must be committed to both a radical, loving embrace of all people, as well as the clear call to biblical fidelity and a vision for wholeness in every area of our lives.

Charles Taylor, the eminent Canadian philosopher, in his book, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, points out that we are experiencing a radical new form of individualism that he, following sociologist Robert Bellah in his classic book, *Habits of the Heart*, calls “expressive individualism.”³ This is a fundamental turn that is different from the normal kind of individualism that has always characterized American society. We are witnessing a whole new vision of human identity marked by several key features. I will note five of them.

First, this new vision of human personhood has created a seismic dualistic separation or fracturing of the human will from the physical body. In this twist of neo-gnostic dualism, our bodies become moldable, like plastic, contingent instruments that must be conformed to the

intuitions, feelings, and whatever social constructions we may dream of in order to conform to our best understanding of ourselves. Alisdair MacIntyre, the Scottish ethicist, calls this dualistic view of personhood a view of self that is “forgetful of the body.”⁴ Expressive individualism is one of the leading terms for this phenomenon, but others, like Michael Sandel, have called this the “unencumbered self.” The common point, however, is that the self has been severed from the body and this new self is the self-originating, socially constructed source of all claims. Again, our hearts go out to anyone who is experiencing gender dysphoria and great pastoral care is needed to help anyone navigate this challenge to the very nature of personhood.

Second, this new vision of human personhood has moved us as a culture and society from what Charles Taylor calls a “transcendent frame” to an “immanent frame.” By this he means our society has fully jettisoned any transcendent moral or ethical foundations or boundaries to our existence or our decisions that either refers or defers to God or any other authoritative source, whether the Oracle of Delphi, Confucian ethics, or the God of biblical revelation. The “immanent frame” refers to the solitary, socially constructed self, leading to a new view of human personhood. It renders us forgetful of the image of God as that which frames both our dignity and our identity. John Kilner, the professor emeritus of Christian ethics at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and I might add, former professor of ethics here at Asbury Theological Seminary, in his magisterial work on the image of God, *Dignity and Destiny*, points out that the image of God is not merely that which marks us as individuals (though it is never less than that), but the whole of humanity in community is collectively

3 Taylor, 376. See especially chapter 21, “The Expressivist Turn.” Taylor says, “expressivist individuation has become one of the cornerstones of modern culture.” Bellah, 46, 142. See especially chapter 6, “Individualism.”

4 MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 5. Also quoted by Snead in “The Anthropology of Expressive Individualism,” 1, 2.

marked by the image of God.⁵ Therefore, the loss of the image of God is profound and touches on not just the ground of individual dignity but the capacities and destiny of the whole human race. But today, it is not just the loss of the image of God but the whole reference to God himself as creator and redeemer has been lost. This complete independence of all sacred order, the utter loss of all foundations and external reference points, and even the loss of the image of God, is unprecedented in human history. In a culture where all that is left of personhood is the atomized self, ethics becomes nothing but a function of feelings or what Alsdair MacIntyre called “emotivism.”⁶ This trend has been coming for some time as noted in previous popular books such as Christopher Lasch’s book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, and Tom Wolfe’s, *The “Me” Generation*.⁷ But these predictive trends finally seem to have reached the mainstream. For example, it was the actor Brad Pitt who summed it up quite well when he said, “When I get untethered from religion, it wasn’t a loss of faith for me. It was a discovery of self. I have faith that I am capable enough to

handle any situation...”⁸ Without any external or stabilizing reference points, our culture has become increasingly volatile,

unstable, and on the verge of collapse. Therefore chaos, turmoil, fragmentation, and incessant division has become the order of the day. There are no shared external reference points in making any

ethical or moral statements. Thus, a statement like, “one should not change one’s gender” is taken to mean nothing more than “I personally disapprove of transgenderism.” As Keith Stanglin has argued in his new book, *Ethics Beyond Rules*, contemporary ethics has become nothing more than “personal preferences.”⁹ Even the church has shifted its language from that of divine, objective revelation to that of the Christian “perspective.”

Third, this new vision of human personhood marks the rise of the therapeutic self. The once particularized language of therapy has now become the common language of social discourse. We freely talk about coping mechanisms, codependent relationships, and dysfunctional families. We call ourselves OCD. We talk about projection, and we think little of saying things like, “I feel heard, but not listened to.” One of the reasons for this is that the very notion of personhood today is essentially a socially derived psychological construction. The sociologist Philip Rieff called this “Psychological Man,” intentionally framed in that way to show how it has displaced Karl Marx’s “Economic Man.”¹⁰ No longer is our identity established within external structures such as family, church, or nation, or even the economics of class and trade. Our very personhood is now defined internally by our perceived ideal psychological state. This inward turn prioritizes the inner psychological self, placing it at the heart of human personhood. Augustine is the one who identified one of the key features of the sin nature as *incurvatus in se*, the heart turned in upon itself.¹¹ The late John Paul II called this, more simply, the “interior gaze.”¹² This is why

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5 Kilner, 135–41.

6 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 6–35. Emotivism is developed extensively in chapter 2, “The Nature of Moral Disagreement Today and the Claims of Emotivism,” and chapter 3, “Emotivism: Social Content and Social Context.”

7 Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, and Wolfe, “The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening.” This essay also appeared in chapter six of Tom Wolfe’s *Mauve Gloves and Madmen Clutter and Vine*.

8 Pitt, Facebook Post (11 January 2014).

9 Stanglin, 7.

10 Rieff, 26–27, 39–41, 50, 53–55, 58, 61, 200.

11 Duncan, “*Homo Incurvatus in Se: Luther and Camus on Human Nature*,” and Matt Jenson, *The Gravity of Sin: Augustine, Luther and Barth on Homo Incurvatus in se*.

12 John Paul II, 33. This is found in his homily, “Creation as a Fundamental and Original Gift” first

we can be so socially connected through social media and yet, at the same time, feel so profoundly lonely. I recently saw a Christian Sunday school program that was designed for children. The curriculum was designed around the seven dwarfs of the Snow White story. It asks the children to look inward and identify which of the seven dwarfs they were: Sleepy, Bashful, Sneezy, Happy, Grumpy, and so forth. What the curriculum never did was to summon the children to look upward and out of themselves and see the glory and majesty of God. Brothers and sisters, this is not just a pop culture problem. This inward gaze has sunk its tentacles deep within the church itself.

Fourth, this new vision of human personhood has united the psychological self's well-being with one's sexual identity. I grew up in a world where moral relativism was expressed by such statements as "what does it matter what two consenting adults do in the privacy of a bedroom." Today it increasingly evident that your identity as straight, gay, bi, queer, and so on is highly connected to who you are at the deepest level and, therefore, must be publicly declared. This past June, Cal Nassib, a defensive end for the Las Vegas Raiders, became the first active NFL player to declare that he is gay. In early July, Andrew Cuomo's daughter, Michaela Cuomo, came out in an Instagram post that she now considers herself demisexual (earlier she reminded

us that she had publicly declared herself to be at various points in her young life a lesbian, bisexual, queer, but is

now "evolving" into demisexual).¹³ Both of these recent examples were, of course, heralded as a profoundly brave and authentic public statements. But we must ask: why has it become so important for everyone to declare their sexual orienta-

tion, or any number of other identities, publicly? Why did Facebook go from having two identities to over fifty, enabling you to declare to all your friends who you assert yourself to be? Even Zoom allows you to clarify in the subline whether you want to be referred to as "he," "she," or "they" since your inner self may not at all correspond to any biological markers of identity established at birth. Indeed, the whole notion of "coming out" tells us that the public declaration of one's sexuality somehow touches on our deepest identity, our truest self. True happiness today must culminate and be supremely manifested not in providing for a family or having a meaningful career—that all has its place—but the apex of true happiness at this cultural moment is sexual satisfaction. This is because, in one generation, sex has moved from being understood as some activity, whether sanctioned or not) to sex as an identity, i.e., the deepest marker of personhood. Sex is now become the very basis of our public, social identity. Let me clarify that for those who are committed to Christian faithfulness who are struggling with their sexual or gender identity, confess this to the community as a part of the healing process. This is a positive expression of "public confession." The church must embrace the difference, for example, between someone committed to celibacy who confesses their same-sex attractions and someone who is seeking to normalize same-sex behavior in the church.

Finally, this new vision of personhood reveals the profoundly anti-historical bent in late modernity. History today is the story of corruption and oppression. History no longer anchors us in shared values and even aspirations towards "a more perfect union." We are not the source of our problems because "our hearts are always in the right place." Society is the locus of all ills, chained to the cruel taskmaster of history. The Western world credits youth with wisdom and those

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delivered on January 2, 1980, and later published in his theology of the body.

¹³ This was reported throughout multiple media outlets on July 5, 2021, based on Cuomo's Instagram Live post.

older as naïve, un-woke and with little to offer us as we traverse the contours of this Brave New World. This overthrow of history is, of course, not really about what really happened at the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 B.C., or any other historical event per se, but about the overthrow of historic institutions like family, church, and marriage. These kinds of embedded histories represent external impositions on the freedom of our atomized will and autonomous self. The expressive self wants no history but our own history.

These five aspects of personhood in late modernity are not trends and writings found only in the faculty lounges of ivy league schools or the writings of Peter Singer, professor of bioethics at Princeton University. Rather, this new vision of personhood has become deeply embedded in the social awareness, the social imaginary of our day-to-day plausibility structures found in countless examples across mainstream America, pop culture, and social media. We do not have time to explore how these themes have worked their way deeply into our legal system in countless ways that affect the day-to-day lives of Americans. One of the best books to explore the legal ramifications of contemporary views of personhood can

be found in Carter Snead's book, *What it Means to Be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics*.¹⁴ It was Anthony Kennedy, for example, who wrote in the majority opinion in the case *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* in 1992 that, "at the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."¹⁵ This is not Hollywood or Peter Singer, this is a Supreme Court justice speaking on behalf of all of us in this new legal definition of personhood that now undergirds our laws.

Now, in surveying these five features of this new view of personhood, it might be easy to succumb to despair or feeling immobilized in the face of these seemingly intractable trends. Truly the *zeitgeist* of our age can, at times, take your breath away. But all such trends and trajectories have a lifecycle that cannot stand up in the face of the veritable truths of God's self-disclosure in the Word of God and in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. The church has faced many formidable challenges in our long history and this new view of personhood does not represent the death of God or the shadowy sunset of the church of Jesus Christ.

We must not just "see" but "observe" all of this within the broader historic context of time. In some ways, all five of these trajectories can be summed up in the classic tension seen in Raphael's famous fresco called the *School of Athens*, painted between 1509 and 1511.

This fresco was one of several painted by Raphael for Pope Julius II. The *School of Athens* is Raphael's summary of the entire import of philosophical wisdom. The painting includes such famous philosophers as Archimedes, Socrates, Pythagoras, and Diogenes. But, at the center of the painting are two figures: Plato and Aristotle, the greatest of all western philosophers. Plato is depicted, quite predictably, with his finger pointing upwards—pointing to the transcendent ideals, the forms of



School of Athens by Raphael. Public domain.

14 Snead, *What It Means to Be Human*.

15 *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania, et al.*

which are only found as reflections in this material world. Aristotle is shown with his hand pointing downward to all the particulars of human life and discovery:



Plato and Aristotle

zoology, natural law, rhetoric, psychology, and so forth. Raphael captures in one image the great tension between universals and particulars. If Plato's finger were to rise a bit higher, we might move beyond mere platonic forms and non-personal transcendence. As Christians, we could see him pointing to God, both personal and embedded in his own community of the Trinity but also the community of the saints. But, on the other hand, we also know that God is the author of all the material particulars of this world. So, we cannot let Aristotle's hand pointing downward be lost, or we only end up with some deistic, removed God, or the so-called "god of the philosophers." Aristotle points us to vital, grounded, embodied truths of our universe, the creation of his handiwork, a vision for science and exploration and medicine and classification of the material world. Yet, if Aristotle's hand were to reach a bit lower, he would begin to capture in some way the trajectory of the very worldview we have been depicting, where the transcendent

frame is completely lost in the immanent frame, and if his hand goes low enough, we are left with nothing but an autonomous self, the atomistic will disconnected from all restraints whether God or history. How is this tension resolved? Our history shows that we have moved back and forth like a pendulum, and like all pendulums, it swings and back and forth, ever longing for a resolution and rest.

Raphael resolved this tension by a fresco painted just opposite of the *School of Athens* and intentionally designed to resolve the tension and to show us the way forward wherever in the course of history we may find ourselves on this pendulum. Directly across from the *School of Athens* Raphael painted what is known as the *Disputation of the Holy Sacrament*.

The word "disputation" here does not mean a dispute or argument about the Eucharist but rather a formal examination or declaration about the meaning of the Eucharist. Raphael intentionally painted both frescoes with a similar overall frame: the pavement, the four steps leading upwards, the vaulted ceiling. But in this fresco the *transcendent* is manifest. The veil is lifted, and we see God himself enthroned in his heavenly abode, surrounded by saints and angels. God the Father is at the top, Christ, or God the Son, is enthroned as the king of the universe, and God the Holy Spirit is depicted as a descending dove. There is the transcendent frame that has been lost in late modernity. Below are the peoples of the world, peasants and kings, bishops and laity, rich and poor, men and women. If Raphael was painting it today, he joyfully would have included Asians and Africans and Latinos, but he was a man of his own time, and we have to understand that he was trying to depict the world in all of its diversity as he knew it. But the knot that ties the heavenly and the earthly together and is the centerpiece of this fresco, in the place of Plato and Aristotle in the *School of Athens* is the Holy Sacrament. The sacrament, of course, represents the Incarnation, which is the knot that ties heaven to earth and brings final resolution to the upward pointing



Disputation of the Holy Sacrament by Raphael. Public domain.

finger of Plato and the downward hand of Aristotle. The one thing our culture seems to recognize, at least intuitively, is that something is badly wrong in our culture. This is not some cultural golden age. Our culture simply has no idea what the harmonizing resolution is to the clanging discords of our culture. Yet, deep down there is a gnawing in their soul that says, “life must be much more than a personal project of self-invention.” The inward gaze starts to show its hollowness rather quickly because we were designed for eternity. We were fashioned in the image of God for union with him.

Let us explore how this amazing fresco resolves each of the five aspects of the self of late modernity that we now inhabit. First, the dualism that separates our personhood from the physical body. Brothers and sisters, at the heart of the fresco is the bodily incarnation, the second person of the Trinity made flesh who suffered and died for us, of which the sacrament is emblematic.

Second, the tragic loss of the transcendent frame for a solitary immanent frame that says that this world is all there is. Yet here it is in the fresco; we see the glorious transcendence of God, the Triune God enthroned in the heavens, along with all the angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, and the redeemed people of

God. Notice that Raphael depicts the external reference point of divine revelation both in Moses holding the Ten Commandments as well as in the cheru-

bim holding forth the Word of God, the revelation of God’s self-disclosure and his will and divine purposes for his creation. We see glimpses of our own transcendence rooted in the *imago dei*, and yet our own immanence in our earthly, bodily habitation, the reconciliation of the greatest hopes of Plato and

Aristotle. Christ as the Second Adam, the perfect image of God, made possible through the Incarnation, comes to fully restore our destiny as bearers of the image of God. Once again, drawing from John Kilner’s beautiful phrase, Christ represents the “blueprint for humanity.”¹⁶

Third, the loss of personhood into the therapeutic self that is collapsed in upon itself—*incurvatus in se*. It is here that in the fresco that we see depicted our deliverance from the inward gaze, the endless self-psychologizing as our eyes are drawn outward and upward to these transcendent realities. Here in the fresco, we see that all personhood is externally rooted in the One Great “I Am” of the Trinity! Isaiah rightly rebuked Babylon when twice (Isaiah 47:8 and 10) Babylon declared with the spirit of all the ages, “I Am, and there is none besides me.” The spirit of our age is no different than that of Babylon and the same headlong destruction that they received will fall upon us if we do not affirm that He alone is the great I Am, the one Person from whom the dignity and true identity of all personhood must flow.

Fourth, the loss of any transcendent identity outside of sexuality. The Eucharist represents the knot that ties heaven to earth through the Incarnation. Jesus Christ is depicted as sitting on the throne of the universe. Our greatest identity is not anything that frames modern cultural identities, whether ethnic, economic, racial, or sexual, but our deepest identity is in Jesus Christ. Sexuality in the biblical vision is linked to fruitfulness. The family is the icon of the Trinity, just as our bodies are icons of the Incarnation.

Finally, our loss of history is finally restored in the truest lens of history, which is redemptive history. Here in the fresco, we see the whole history of redemption displayed before us—God’s great metanarrative that frames history as God reveals himself to his people, through Law, through the prophets, and ultimately in and through Jesus Christ, all gloriously displayed. Here we are reminded of the sure historicity enshrined

The inward gaze starts to show its hollowness rather quickly because we were designed for eternity. We were fashioned in the image of God for union with him.

16 Kilner, 92.

in Jesus' passion where he suffered not just generically in some timeless void, or in God's own internal psyche, but in the real history of Pontius Pilate. Jesus' suffering on the cross is the lens through which we understand our own history and the healing of the nations that is extended through the gospel. This calls for compassionate pastoral work to reach out with love to all those who are struggling with any of these challenges to personhood. A properly ordered church must stand firmly on the grounds of both a fully biblical vision of personhood, as well as the equally strong call to fully embrace all people without hesitation into the church as the locus of healing and redemption.

This summer, we all witnessed the tragic collapse of the Champlain Tower condo in south Florida. The collapse is known as a "pancake collapse;" as each floor fell, it collapsed the floor beneath it. But remarkably, structural engineers believe that the reason it fell was not because the upper floor or any of the floors were particularly weak but because the foundation of the entire building was compromised and that ultimately the

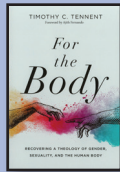
upper floors had no proper foundation to hold them up, and so they collapsed. In the same way, it is important that we look beneath the collapsing structures of our society and discern the deeper foundational erosions and cracks that are the deeper source of our cultural malaise. Your task, through preaching, teaching, and radically embracing pastoral care is to reunite heaven and earth and restore to this culture the only true foundation for personhood; namely Jesus Christ, the incarnate One who came down from heaven for us and for our salvation.

So, Dr. Kinlaw, thank you for your wise and prophetic comment to me when I asked, "What is the greatest theological challenge we face in our day?" Personhood. May God grant each and every one of us the courage, wisdom, and love to stand in the midst of this culture and recall, recover, and remember a deeper vision, a more profound vision, for life and identity and personhood that is only found in the Triune God. Amen.

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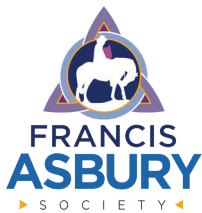
For the Body

By Timothy C. Tennent

\$22.95; 272 pages; hardback

The human body is an amazing gift, yet today, many people downplay its importance and fail to understand what Christianity teaches about our bodies and their God-given purposes. We misunderstand how the body was designed, its role in relating to others, and lack awareness of the dangers of objectifying the body, divorcing it from its intended purpose.

In *For the Body*, author Timothy Tennent looks at what it means to be created in the image of God and how our bodies serve as icons that illuminate God's purposes. Tennent examines topics like marriage, family, singleness, and friendship, and he looks at how the human body has been objectified in art and media today. He also offers a framework for discipling people today in a Christian theology of the body.



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