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ST310: God & Humanity: Foundations of Counseling

Book Review: Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*

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Mary Anne Favale's *The Genesis of Gender* is a substantive theological framework in reflection to contemporary debates about gender and sex that seeks to reorient these discussions in light of the doctrine of creation. Favale writes this book from a Roman Catholic perspective, and uses Scripture, philosophy, and gender theory to show how the differences between the sexes are a good thing rather than a restrictive paradigm. Favale does not just use modern sociopolitical conversation. She bases her arguments in theology to explain what it means for men and women to be created as embodied, sexed persons before God. She challenges modern notions that separate gender identity from biological sex and also Christian responses that have been mostly reactionary rhetoric or insufficient theological depth, especially those claims that have been made without grounding. *The Genesis of Gender* is a systematic theological work that articulates a coherent framework of creation, embodiment, and human identity in the face of cultural confusion.

The central argument of the book is that sexual difference is not an accidental feature of human existence, but rather a fundamental dimension of God's intentions in creation. Favale argues that Genesis 1-2 establishes sexed embodiment as part of the original goodness of creation that was instituted before the Fall, when sin and distortion entered creation. Favale argues that gender cannot be separated from sex without

devaluing the body itself. Modern theories assert that the body is neutral and we the “self” get to decide what to do with it. Favale states that the body already bears meaning as created. Therefore, human freedom is not located in the power of the self to redefine oneself apart from embodiment in the created order of the Lord. Instead, human freedom is receiving one’s bodily identity as a gift. This allows sexual differences to be ordered toward relationality, communion, and mutual self-sacrifice rather than hierarchy, domination, or just functionality.¹

One of the most significant and unique aspects of this book is her emphasis on embodiment as a source of meaning. Favale rejects any anthropology that prioritizes inner consciousness or experience over bodily presence and existence. She instead argues for a human person as an integrated unity of body and soul. This emphasis resonates strongly with Ian McFarland’s account of creation in *From Nothing*, because he argues for the grounding identity of humanity to be creature. McFarland argues that to be created is fundamentally to receive one’s being rather than to generate it, and that creaturely limits are not defects to be overcome but rather conditions for meaningful existence before God.² This book’s account of sexed embodiment reflects this same theological logic: that sexual difference is not an arbitrary constraint, but rather a part of the structured goodness of creation. Favale’s careful distinctions between equality and ‘sameness’, and between complementarity and cultural stereotypes, are especially

¹ Mary Anne Favale, *The Genesis of Gender* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2022), ch. 1-3.

² Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 1-25.

helpful for theological students navigating modern discussions that often confuse ontological claims with social roles.³

Favale's emphasis on relationality also invites fruitful dialogue with Susan Eastman's *Paul and the Person*. While Eastman's work focuses on Pauline anthropology rather than the Genesis creation narratives, her insistence that personhood is fundamentally "second-person", or relational and participatory, complements Favale's rejection of autonomous selfhood. Eastman argues that persons are constituted through relationships (participation with Christ in His life, suffering, death, and resurrection) rather than through isolated acts of self-definition or separate agency.⁴ This reinforces that embodiment and relationality are inseparable aspects of human identity. Sexed embodiment is not incidental to personhood but rather integral to how humans are created to exist with, and for, one another before God. Together, these works challenge modern claims that the self is self-constituting and instead present identity as something received, sustained, and oriented toward communion with one another, and the Lord.

While Favale's argument in this book is theologically coherent and philosophically rigorous, the book can be difficult to interpret on the pastoral level. This book is strongest at the level of ontology and the arguments about embodiment and what the quality of being "created" means for humans specifically. However, it is lighter on the levels of lived experience of suffering and alienation. Experiences such as what

³ Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, ch. 5.

⁴ Susan G. Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul's Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 1-32.

the culture defines as “gender dysphoria”, “bodily estrangement”, or even dissatisfaction with one’s embodiment are acknowledged but not explored at length or in depth. Favale instead prioritizes doctrinal clarity over extended phenomenological analysis or case-based evidence of her framework. From a systematic theology perspective, this raises an important tension: how doctrines of creation relate to wounded embodiment in a fallen world marked by sin, shame, and distorted desire.⁵ Dan B. Allender’s *The Healing Path* reiterates that human brokenness is often experienced precisely at the level of the body and identity, and that healing requires sustained attention to suffering rather than conceptual resolution alone.⁶ Deeper engagement with pastoral realities could strengthen this work.

Mary Anne Favale’s *The Genesis of Gender* is best suited for readers seeking a serious theologically grounded account of sex and gender rooted in the doctrine of creation. It will be particularly valuable for students of systematic theology, anthropology, and pastors, deacons, and church leaders as well. It is pertinent in the church setting for there to be strong theologically grounded teachings on gender and sex in an age of confusion and idolatry. *The Genesis of Gender* invites the church to respond not merely by all-or-nothing rejection or affirmation, but rather with a compelling vision of embodied life ordered toward love, communion, and faithfulness to God’s wisdom in creation.

⁵ Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, ch. 7.

⁶ Dan B. Allender, *The Healing Path: How the Hurts in Your Past Can Lead You to a More Abundant Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1999), Introduction.