

An Extended Review of Abigail Favale, *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory*¹

DENNY BURK

Denny Burk is Professor of Biblical Studies at Boyce College and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and the Director of the Center for Gospel and Culture. He earned his ThM from Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas, and his PhD in New Testament from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. Dr. Burk is the author of numerous articles that have been published in the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, *Tyndale Bulletin*, *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, and the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. He is the author of *What is the Meaning of Sex?* (Crossway, 2013), co-author of *Transforming Homosexuality* (P&R, 2015), and the author of *1-2 Timothy and Titus* in the ESV Expository Commentary (Crossway, 2018). Dr. Burk also serves as the Associate Pastor at Kenwood Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky.

The work under review is one of the most riveting and timely books that I have ever read. The author is George Fox University professor Abigail Favale, and the book is *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory*. Even though I differ with the author on several important points (more on that below), her overall thesis is unassailable in my view. On some of the biggest and most contested issues of our day, this book is a breath of fresh air—indeed, of fresh, clean, *Christian* air blowing from the ancient past.

In the *Genesis of Gender*, Favale exposes the philosophical and spiritual bankruptcy of what she calls the “gender paradigm” (p. 30). The gender paradigm is a worldview that says gender is a state of mind rather than a bodily reality. The gender paradigm says that there is no givenness to human nature. Rather, we are all existentialists now—forging and determining our

own identities in ways that may or may not correspond to our bodily reality. If a woman thinks she is a man, then she is one no matter what her body says. Indeed, her shifting and subjective self-understanding as *male*, *female*, or *otherwise* is more determinative of who she really is than her body. If the body doesn't correspond to her self-understanding, then her body has to change to match the mind rather than the mind changing to match the body. That is the *gender paradigm* in a nutshell.

Favale argues that the *Genesis paradigm* of Scripture is fundamentally at odds with the *gender paradigm*. The book of Genesis reveals that God created male and female equally in the image of God and yet also designed these image-bearers to be different from one another. Favale writes:

Their difference is complementary, but asymmetrical; this is not a mirror image or polar opposite. She resembles him in their shared humanity—"bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh"—but differs in the feminine form of her humanity. Genesis affirms a balance of sameness and difference between the sexes (p. 39).

According to Favale's understanding of Genesis, male and female hold in common the same human nature while also displaying differences according to the body's organization for reproduction. A man is a person whose body has the potential to produce small gametes (sperm), and a woman is a person whose body has the potential to produce large gametes (ova). The body's organization for reproduction, therefore, offers us the clearest and most reliable criteria for defining the difference between male and female (pp. 123-24). Sex is not something that is "assigned" at birth. On the contrary, sex difference is a gift from God to be received with humility and gratitude.

The *Genesis paradigm*, therefore, cannot be reconciled with the *gender paradigm*. Indeed, the gender paradigm is a denial of human nature and ultimately leads to destruction and pain for those who reject the gift. For example, the explosion of so-called *rapid onset gender dysphoria* among adolescent girls is a direct consequence of the *gender paradigm* and its rising influence in our culture. It's a paradigm driven not by science but by postmodern ideology, and it is devastating the lives and health of countless young women who are now suppressing their puberty, sterilizing themselves through testosterone injections, and destroying their reproductive anatomy through elective surgery (pp. 182-85).

Favale argues that this model of caring for the gender dysphoric, “while often motivated by good will, is ultimately unethical” (p. 197). She contends that this model...

...encourages violence to the healthy body rather than carefully working through the underlying causes of psychological distress and considering ways to manage that distress that do not cause physical harm. In this model, the body is the scapegoat, blamed as the sole source of one’s pain and sacrificed on the altar of self-will (p. 198).

She argues for a different approach—one that takes the givenness of the body seriously, one that sees the body as integral to human identity (p. 198). She asks, “What if we embraced this as a guiding principle: *do not harm a healthy body?*” (p. 199).

The Genesis of Gender has much to commend it. You will read in these pages a thoroughgoing case for the Christian view of the body. We are not *merely* bodies. Humans consist of a unity of body and soul together. Nevertheless, we are our bodies, and our bodies are us. God discloses his will for us in part through the complementary differences between male and female bodies. In other words, our bodies aren’t lying to us about who we are as male and female.

To that end, Favale offers one of the clearest responses I’ve ever read to a common defeater of the male-female binary: “*What about people with intersex?*” She demonstrates that people suffering from intersex conditions are not exceptions to the binary but variations within it. No matter how seriously things may go awry in a person’s sexual development, they still have a body with the potential to produce either large gametes (ova) or small gametes (sperm) but not both. People with intersex conditions have bodies that manifest the binary, even though the reality may be hidden from the naked eye (pp. 115-39).

One of the most powerful aspects of *The Genesis of Gender* is the author’s own testimony, which Favale weaves throughout the book. Favale was raised as an evangelical Christian but started drifting away from those roots during her college years. She embraced evangelical egalitarianism in college, which then became a way-station to full-blown postmodern feminism and queer theory (especially of the continental variety). By the time of her graduate

studies, Favale had left the Christian faith altogether. But somewhere along the way, she began to see the intellectual cul-de-sac that is postmodernism and eventually made her way to Roman Catholicism.

This story informs everything about Favale's personal interest in feminism, postmodern philosophy, and Christianity. In one way, this is a part of the strength of the book. Favale has immersed herself in postmodern feminist literature and queer theory. She knows the sources of the ideas that have trickled down from the Ivory Tower to Main Street. She therefore can critique the movement as someone who knows this worldview from the inside out. For that reason, her critiques of critical theory are devastating.

Evangelical readers will find much in this book to agree with. I know I certainly did. But they will also find some aspects of this work at odds with their evangelical convictions. Favale is a Roman Catholic, and that comes out in numerous ways throughout the book. The last pages of the book, for example, are thick not only with exalted prose but also with Marian devotion.

More significantly, Favale embraces higher critical approaches to Scripture that weaken the larger argument that she is trying to make about the body. For example, her chapter on Genesis rejects Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and argues that Genesis was written during the 6th century BC (p. 34). As such, Genesis is "true myth," but a myth nonetheless (p. 37). Favale doesn't grapple with the problems that her view creates for the doctrine of inspiration. She doesn't deal with the fact that the Old and New Testaments—including Jesus himself—present Moses as the author of the Pentateuch.² Moreover, the Old and New Testaments also allude to the Pentateuch as if its narratives are history rather than myth. Likewise, Paul writes, "These things *happened* to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction" (1 Cor 10:11, italics mine). Notice also the Apostle Paul's statement that "Adam was formed first, then Eve" (1 Tim 2:13).

Not only does Favale's approach create problems for inspiration, it also creates problems for her own argument. Jesus himself grounds the meaning of marriage in the events narrated in Genesis 1-2 (Matt 19:4-6). How could anyone take Jesus' teaching seriously if those events never even happened? If Adam and Eve really weren't the special creation of God as depicted in Genesis 1-2, then the case for their abiding relevance to the "gender paradigm" falls apart. If the sexual binary isn't rooted in an historical and unfallen Adam and Eve, then Genesis may be beautiful prose but would be irrelevant to the

question of human good and flourishing in the present.

There are other aspects of Favale's work that are not above critique, but I won't rehearse all of them in this short review. Rather, I want to focus on its contribution. Critical theory is burning through our cultural imagination like a universal acid, and Favale offers a formidable counterargument in this book. We need more voices like hers to expose the weaknesses of the *gender paradigm* and of critical theory, not less. For that reason, this book is really important in spite of some of the weaknesses that I have noted above. I am grateful both for her argument and her story. They are both very powerful, and I hope they get a wide hearing.

¹ Abigail R. Favale, *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2022)

² For example, see Deut 31:9, 29; Josh 1:7, 13; 8:31; Matt 8:4; 17:3; 19:7-8; 22:24; Mark 1:44; 7:10; 10:3; 12:26; Luke 2:22; 5:14; 20:28, 37; 24:27, 44; John 1:17; 5:46; 7:19, 22, 25; Rom 9:15; 10:5, 19; 1 Cor 9:9; 2 Cor 3:15; Heb 8:5, 9:19.