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The Gender Paradigm with Abigail Favale

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

What is feminism? What is intersectionality? Who is Judith Butler? How does childbearing change a woman? Why do Catholic feminist scholars have such interesting Italian last names? These are just some of the questions Kevin explores with Abigail Favale as they talk about her book, *The Genesis of Gender* (Ignatius Press, 2022). With learning, wit, and great aplomb, Abigail shares her how story of deconversion and reconversion and how she came to see, from the inside, the emptiness of mainstream feminist ideology.

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Transcript

[Music] Greetings and salutations. Welcome back to our life and books and everything listeners. I'm Kevin Dion and I am joined here.

I'll say more about her in just a moment by our guest today, Abigail Vavali. I get that right. Mm-hmm, you did.

Very helpful. She said like Vavali balls. So thank you.

I had a year ago, my wife was reminding me, I had Erica Bakayaki. So I don't know you excellent Catholic scholars with very creative last names. Hers is what? That's Italian? They're both.

Yeah, they're both Italian. Oh really? Okay. All right.

We will get into the book in just a moment. I want to thank our sponsors Crossway and appreciate all the books that Crossway puts out. I don't, just for our listeners, I don't tell Crossway what books to give me.

They sponsor this and they say, "Can you mention this book?" So I'm just reading what they printed out that I'm supposed to mention today. The new book by Kevin DeYoung. Do not be true to yourself.

Countercultural advice for the rest of your life. So this is a very short book. It's just like 70 pages and it's geared for graduates, high school, college, other young people.

But really, hopefully anybody can benefit from it. Do not be true to yourself. And kind of ties in with Abigail's much longer, more erudite book that we're going to discuss in a moment.

So you can check that out and pick it up. What I have learned, and you can feel free to steal this life lesson, Abigail. What I have learned about writing books is the way to get people to buy your books is to make them very, very short.

Short, simple, catchy titles. So that's what I have done here. So thank you, Abigail, for being here on Life in Books and Everything.

We want to talk about her excellent book came out last year. It's really one of the best books I read last year, *The Genesis of Gender, A Christian Theory*, published by Ignatius. Abigail, welcome to Life in Books and Everything.

Thank you. So tell us about yourself. You are a wife and a mother of four.

You teach at Notre Dame. Give us a little bit more about your bio and introduce yourself. Sure.

So those are all accurate things about me that you just said. Although the move to Notre Dame is pretty recent, we moved last year from Oregon, where I taught at George Fox University, which is a Christian school for the last 12 years or so. I grew up evangelical Christian reading a lot of cross-way books.

I will say that as soon as you say cross-way. I was like, "Oh, I had some of my favorite books as I came from cross-way." Yeah. And then in graduate school, I got very interested in gender theory and feminist theory, and took a bit of a hiatus from Christianity, you might say, and then had a re-conversion into the Catholic tradition.

And now I write from those same topics, but from a Christian perspective. So we're going to get much more into your biography, because your biography is interspersed here with what you were learning and how you were moving through your own waves of feminism, you say, in this book. So I'm a Presbyterian pastor.

I'm an evangelical. So sorry to lose you, but glad you're making steps back in the right direction, as we would understand it. So just tell us a little bit about that.

Your upbringing as an evangelical and what led you to walk away from that, and why when you came back to the Christian faith, did you not step back into that same tradition, but came back into and became a Catholic? Yeah, that's a great question. So I grew up in evangelical Christianity in the Mormon belt of the US. And there are several things I'm very grateful for about my upbringing, and two of those would be first of all just a very... from my earliest memory, I lived a Christ-centered life.

So I had a very simple but deep faith in Jesus, and that I should give my heart to him. And also knowledge of scripture. So I had a very Bible-immersed childhood, and spent a lot of time listening to stories about women in the Bible, especially the Old Testament.

So that all helped form, I think, not only my spiritual life, but also my imagination. So when I went to college, I became very interested in questions about women. What is my role in the church? What is my place before God? What am I called to do? There were times where I felt like I didn't see a viable model for femininity in terms of the kind of person that I am in the tradition that I was raised.

And so I was drawn immediately to feminism, and I thought, "This is what I've been looking for." And initially, I described, like you said, my personal waves of feminism, and that initial wave was an evangelical feminism. So it was very much focused on how do we interpret scripture correctly in ways that really led themselves to an egalitarian kind of reading. And so that's where I spent quite a few years when I was an undergrad.

But by the time I graduated, I had really kind of moved into a more suspicious posture toward Christianity as a whole. So in feminist theory, there's this phrase called a hermeneutics of suspicion, which is basically a way of reading everything, not just text, but certainly scripture, certainly tradition with an attitude or posture of suspicion. So I had very much adopted that.

So I kind of went from like, scripture is God's word, we just need to read it correctly, to actually scripture was written by men, and we should be suspicious of it. And I think once I see that as a really pivotal move from a posture of fidelity to a posture of suspicion. And in that posture, I went more deeply into feminist and gender theory in graduate school.

And even though I was still intellectually very interested in Christianity, I stopped

practicing my faith. I didn't pray, I didn't go to church. I sometimes considered myself a Christian still, but it was just very nominal.

And then when I would say also that I adopted more of a postmodern kind of outlook, which basically is that I saw Christianity as a story, like a human made story that is trying to get some ultimate truth out there that is trying to give us access to maybe some kind of divine reality that is ultimately unknowable. But it's flawed, it's full of patriarchal bias, and it needs to be kind of continually revised in order to be life-giving. And so I had pretty much completely departed from the idea of a God who reveals himself, right? So a God who is actually making a lot of effort to disclose himself to us, right? Anyway, and then to fast forward, I guess, to my return to Christianity, that really was, I think, sparked by becoming a mother for the first time at the age of 29.

And that really opened me to God in a way, I think it kind of pushed me out of that posture of suspicion. Enough to where I began asking questions that I just hadn't asked for a decade. And then I very abruptly became Catholic in that time because I had this hunger for the Eucharist, really.

And I saw in Catholic tradition, especially the feminine genealogy of the faith and the female saints, this kind of community of women. And it actually fulfilled that longing I'd had as an undergraduate about trying to better understand what is my place as a woman specifically in the church. And so since 2014, I've been a Catholic.

And now I'm trying to bring my kind of insider knowledge of the feminist and gender theory world to help other Christians navigate our cultural moment. It's really helpful. So is your husband a Catholic? And was he, you were married at this point? And was this a welcome change when you became Catholic? Was he already there? Oh, no.

No, no, no. So my husband was also raised in Angelical, but it was more intellectually honest than I was. I think so.

He lost his faith. And instead of becoming, instead of staying in this weird ambiguous space, we're like, "Oh, Christianity is a story." And it's beautiful. He was just like, "Well, if it's not true, then to hell with it." And there's something, I think, honest about that.

Either it's true or it's not. And I kind of had this cognitive dissonance for years. So when I became Catholic, he was an atheist.

And then after I became Catholic, which was very much a pretty huge upheaval in our marriage, it was... Especially because I was the one that changed. He didn't do anything. He was just kind of living his life.

And then I was like, "Oh, by the way, I'm now going to adopt a belief system that's going to totally disrupt our marriage and our life." And... But God has worked through that in pretty incredible ways. But so my husband has experienced a very different kind. It's

been fascinating to see how God's worked in his life very differently than he worked in mind.

But yeah, so my husband has experienced also this reawakening of his faith. And he entered the church in 2020 in the middle of COVID, basically. When only 10 people could go to Mass, he was like, "I'll join now." Yeah, that's right.

It's a very small crowd. So I want to ask you about becoming a mother. We're going to get to all the heady intellectual stuff.

But often overlooked in these discussions, and it's something that's really good about your book, is you're very honest and upfront about how this shapes how we think about... In particular, these issues of sex and gender. How could we not think about who we are? And you're writing not just for women, but you're obviously writing as a woman and you're writing for women and thinking about the change. So what changed when you became a mother? Because it's easy to think with any of these books.

You have an impressive PhD, impressive intellectual pedigree. It's impressive whenever we have these intellectual conversations to think. We're talking about just brains in vats somewhere who just read great books, think of ideas, and they don't really have their own personal life.

Or they may not be motivated to defend things in their own personal way of doing things, or they're not affected by the way things happen. One of the things in my evangelical tradition, and you're familiar with it and thinking about biblical manhood and womanhood. Sometimes it's just sort of described in complementarian circles like men and women.

There's just a couple of things. Sorry women, here's the bad news. There's a couple of things.

You can't be a pastor, you've got to submit to your husband. And it's just bad news, but you're going to swallow it because you believe the Bible. And sorry there's a couple of things that don't seem fair.

Rather than thinking with all of the pain that of course comes with it as a part of the fall, some women have said to me, "Kevin, don't be so apologetic for us. We get to do something that's really amazing. Incubate human life and give birth to new people on the planet." And my wife is amazing in what she does.

And sometimes I say, "I'm sorry for ruining your life that you have nine kids." But then I say, "I don't really mean that, of course." And I think she would say she's blessed in that. But I know she loves to hear birth stories, mother's stories. She's just drawn to it in a way that she's surprised even that she is.

And always wants to hear it. So if she were here, she'd want me to ask you in particular. You don't have to give the blood and guts about the birth story unless you want to.

But tell us how did becoming a mother change you? Yeah, I relate to that so much. It's so interesting. I love hearing birth stories too.

And there seems to be almost this default feminine ritual. I've been in so many situations where suddenly in a circle of women, of mothers, we're like, "And now we're all sharing our birth stories." There just seems to be this like, because I think it is an experience that has no analog, really. And you can't understand it until you've gone through it.

And I feel like it, in kind of more mythic or poetic terms, it is like this descent into the underworld. And then you emerge this new person with another person, right? It's like, it's incredible. So for me, I think what really made motherhood a catalyst of my conversion, I think, is that... Let's see.

I would highlight kind of maybe three things. First, the experience, I think, confronted me with the limits of the feminist ideology that I had really adopted. That it kind of become my religion.

So one, the first limit, I guess, that I encountered was pretty early in my pregnancy. So at 12 weeks, I had an ultrasound, which you don't normally have an ultrasound at that time. So you have an ultrasound at the very beginning when there's a tiny little jelly bean in there.

- Is it at 12 weeks? - And then you have the mid-pregnancy ultrasound where it's like, "Oh, there's a leg, and there's a head." And it's kind of abstract. But at 12 weeks, it's kind of an amazing time to have an ultrasound, actually. So it's still in the first trimester.

So it's right at the tail end of the first trimester. But you have this fully formed human being. It's unambiguous.

It's not a weird fish thing. It's not a jelly bean. - It's not an alien looking thing, yeah.

- It is like a baby. But they're small enough that you can see the entire body on the ultrasound. And so I saw my son on there.

I remember his brain. It just looked like cauliflower. And he was like sucking his thumb.

He was kicking. They have so much room at that stage, too. And he was spinning around.

And that, to me, was honestly shocking because even though I think I'd always had some ambivalence about the pro-abortion aspect of feminism, I had certainly thought that, like, "The first trimester is, you know, there's nothing in there. There's no person yet." Right? Like, "You might have a potential person, but there's no person in the first

trimester." So that was like, boom, that is a person. Like, that is a human full-fledged human being.

And he is fricking alive in there, you know? - Just spinning around and by that. - Yeah. So that was like, that confronted me with the poverty of that narrative and the falsity of that narrative.

Right? Like, that's just a lie to say, in the first trimester, there's not a human person in there. I was like, "Okay, that's a lie." So that was disruptive. And then after I actually gave birth, or just the experience of, like, pregnancy and child birth, and lactation, you know, in gender and feminist theory, there's kind of this naive cliché about, well, gender is a social construct, right? So the implicit belief is basically that men and women are interchangeable, but society polarizes them into these, like, super different creatures.

There's some truth to that, I'll say. But I think when I experienced the full activation of my generative potential, I was like, "Whoa, sex is real!" You know? Like Michael and I, like my husband's name is Michael. And we have a pretty, like, in terms of just roles and duties in the house, you know, we've always had a pretty egalitarian dynamic.

But once I became a mother, it was like, "Oh, we had these very real bodily realities that we had to deal with." Right? So... This child's got to eat. Exactly. And so that was kind of like, "Okay, wow, like sexual differences is real, and it's not just this metaphor.

It's not just this, like, beautiful story. It's like really profoundly real, and it shapes our lives in ways that I think can remain hidden in some ways, especially in our kind of laptop culture where sexual difference and dimorphism doesn't seem like that, and it shapes our lives that much. So that would be the second thing.

And then the third thing I think I was, my first child was a son. And becoming a mother to a son specifically, I just became really interested in what boys go through. Like, what is, you know, I had focused so much of my own kind of personal journey and career on the experiences of women, but this opened me, I think, in a new way to, what is it like to grow up as a boy in our culture? Like, what burdens or bad scripts are given to boys and to men or what ways are their dignity undermined? Right? So all of these things, it didn't like instantly make me this anti-feminist, but it just kind of made me seek elsewhere.

Because it was like, "Ah, I have these questions, and this feminist religion I'd adopted is too small to answer them." Right? And so I had to, like, I had to search elsewhere. And I also just think that, like, I was confronted with my own limits, right? I mean, feminism tends to have this. You can have it all, you can do it all.

Yeah, it's... But anybody put any constraints on you? Yeah, like, be whatever you want to be. Well, actually, we're very constrained by our nature, right? And so autonomy is often a prized virtue, or maybe the most prized virtue in feminism. And so going through this

really intense experience and realizing the interdependence of all human nature, that also, again, shifted me away from... I just was like, "This isn't enough.

This world of youth has gotten too small, and I need any dancers elsewhere." Yeah, that's really good. And one of the things I think you hit on this dynamic later in the book, even with the sort of second wave feminism, and I'll ask you in a bit to explain some of these waves, but where escape from the surly bonds of domesticity to use the import Reagan into feminist, which is for God, but to escape those bonds means you're the career woman and free from just the drudgery, the Betty Friedan sort of understanding of what it means to be at home. One of the ironies is, if a feminist has children and then is going to still do it all, someone's going to care for the child, and who's going to do it? Well, almost certainly, it's not men.

It's other women who are either with their own children at home who are trying to earn money or who are going to be paid probably a relatively meager wage to care for children. Now, that's not to shame everyone out there who may have no other choice, and there's lots of different ways that we can have to make those decisions, but it's just to say that someone at some point will have to care for children if we're any sort of humane society, and no matter what our very esoteric theories say, human nature reasserts itself, and it's almost certainly going to be women doing the bulk of caring for these children, as much as we certainly want fathers to be responsible, and I'm engaged with all of my kids and making really cringy dad jokes and doing all the rest. In fact, I was speaking at our high school baccalaureate because our church has a school, and I usually do that each year, and my kids who are in high school, my teenagers said, "Dad, can you just run by us if you're going to try to make any pop culture references?" Because, and I was like, "You know what? I'm really -- I was going to make my main point just about the Taylor Swift era's tour.

Like, "Dad, please, no." I said, "I'm just kidding. I don't know anything about that." So, yes, I try to do the requisite dad things, but how did you find these conversations when you were in these spaces, which were for quite a long time. You talk about -- I think it was your master's, not quite your doctorate work, where you said you were an oddity, even though you were really on board with this feminist, intellectual theory, you were in a heterosexual marriage, and if not religious, you said you weren't not religious.

And this was very strange where you said most of the women in the program were just floating between different lesbian relationships. How odd was it for you in that atmosphere, and do these very practical nitty-gritty sort of discussions come up in those circles? No, it's so fascinating how detached a lot of feminist theory, and certainly gender theory, absolutely gender theory. It's remarkable how detached it is from the phenomenon of motherhood at all.

Here's an interesting illustration. This was like, I don't know. I want to say 2014,

aroundish.

So, it was after my conversion. It must have been like 2015. I went to the AAR-SBL, the American Academy of -- this huge convention of all the religion Bible scholars around the world, really.

It's a crazy gathering. It's a crazy gathering. It's a crazy -- lots of tweed.

Lots of tweed. So, I went there, and there was a long two-hour panel about feminism and Christianity or whatever. So, I was like, oh, I wonder what they're going to talk about.

It was about sexuality. It was like feminism, sexuality, and religion. And so, I went there, and in the entire two hours, and you had panelists from all kinds of different traditions, like Buddhism, the whole gamut of Christianity, not a single person even mentioned as an aside that sex might result in pregnancy for women.

It was fascinating. I was sitting there, and I was like, at what point is anyone going to even mention that like, well, this might happen, you know, especially two women. So, it was really fascinating how, in a sense, sterilized the feminist imagination is.

It's almost like -- and this is one of my now critiques of feminism -- is that it's basically adopted a bias toward the masculine in that what really oppresses women is their femaleness. It's the capacity for pregnancy. It's their fertility.

And so, in order for women to be free, to be liberated, to be successful in society, they essentially have to be stripped from their femaleness. They have to function in the world as much like men as possible. And so, feminist theory has really adopted that so much as an ideal that -- now, there are exceptions to this.

There are exceptions to feminists who are very much concerned about this phenomenon and who have much more family-centered, kind of like Eric Kabaki, for example. But people like her, people like myself, you know, we don't represent the mainstream. And the mainstream still has that, I would say, has bought into that framing, so it doesn't talk about motherhood.

Or it's seen as something that's oppressive and we need to kind of limit it, or it shouldn't be imposed upon women, right? It's always seen as this kind of like this oppressive force that needs to be tightly controlled, that we would need to be able to opt out of at any moment. I haven't forbid that it might actually be life-giving, literally life-giving, but also with all of the pain and drudgery and all of that's real, it can actually be very life-giving for women. And there must be -- was there a sense that if someone actually wanted to be a mother or was going to enjoy being a mother that you just couldn't even talk about that? No, I think so.

I mean, in the program I was in, it was very so theoretical. I mean, it was just like up at

the clouds. You said I wanted to talk about it.

You realized I think I'm just making stuff up. Oh, totally. That wasn't when I was writing my dissertation.

I'd be like, "Kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk" and then all of a sudden I would look up and be like, "I'm just making this up, right? Like it's just language games, essentially." Anyway, now in more casual conversation, sure, you know, there would be -- I think that would be maybe a more typical -- there would be the line of like, "Well, you know, of course like if a woman wants to do this, if she chooses to do that, that's fine, she should be able to choose it." There was still always this kind of implicit like, "But that's a choice that's like, "Rrrr," you know, kind of like, "It's kind of a sellout," you know. So I would say that it was always devalued. It just depends on like to what extent and how explicitly or implicitly.

But most of the time it was just forgotten. It was like -- and this is very explicit in gender theory, which completely forgets and actively tries to dismantle generativity, right? So, you know, Judith Butler, who's one of the -- probably the godmother, really, of -- or the godless mother of gender theory. She's not a mother, but yeah, right.

Yeah, well, actually, she is. But, yeah, so she's very explicit about the fact that her philosophy is all about denaturalizing heterosexuality. And she, even at one point in one of her texts, she warns feminists who are critical of like surrogacy.

She's like, "Ah, be careful about criticizing surrogacy because you might accidentally naturalize the idea that it's women who get pregnant." You know, so it's like, that's for her. It's always an oppressive construct. Like, we have to be free from our nature, essentially.

So say a little bit more about -- we're jumping to -- Yeah, sorry. No, that's great. Because Judith Butler is, you said, looms large in all of these discussions in her book, "Gender Trouble," but there's others as well.

So who is she? Why is she so influential such that anyone who's in any sort of gender program or gender studies is reading Judith Butler and canonized almost, even though you point out here at one point she won an award from the Guardian on the most impenetrable sentence prose, which just isn't to pick on her, but just does say something about what you said. These language games you throw in post-structural as hegemony, and you just -- so who is she? What's her big idea why she's so important? Right. What's her personal aim? You say at one point she wants to deconstruct every norm related to sex and gender, and that gets to incest to everything in dismantle heteronormativity.

Is this a personal project for her? Give us a little pracy on Judith Butler and why she's important. Okay. So her big idea, I guess, and to just contextualize her in kind of the arc of feminist theory, so I'll do this super quick.

Give us the waves. Okay. So when we talk about feminism having waves, the first wave is really the battle for women's suffrage, so the vote, and that kind of starts at the end of the 19th century and really peaks in the early 20th century, and then goes dormant, right? Women who were active in that struggle, they were not wanting to dismantle the system.

They did not want to push women out of the domestic sphere. This is Erica's point with Mary Wollstonecraft. Exactly.

Exactly. So it was more about -- and it was very liberal in the sense that it was working within the political system of liberalism that the United States is founded in, right? Like, it's a liberal society in that sense. So it was about giving women access to rights and protections within that system.

And it still was very, I think, virtuous in the sense that they were -- the first wave feminists were concerned about family planning, but their solution for that was men controlling themselves. It wasn't about women changing their bodies, right? So there was -- like, the birth control movement was kind of starting at the same time as the first wave feminism, but they were not yet allied. And so that alliance was -- oh, yeah, go ahead.

Oh, just to say, Erica makes this point looking at Mary Wollstonecraft that one of her big critiques is to point out the double standard between men and women that men were excused to be promiscuous and not be involved in domestic affairs. And to some degree, feminism has always pointed out that inconsistency and yet those -- at least some of those early wave feminists were saying, hey, that's an inconsistency. You know what? The answer is not that women become more like promiscuous men.

The answer is that we hold men to a standard of sexual chastity as well. And so that's a very different solution to a perennial problem than we find as the wave rolls on the second and third wave feminism. So sorry to interrupt.

No, super different too because the virtue-based approach presumes that we're actually working in harmony with our nature. And in fact, we're making it flourish, right? Because virtue is human excellence, right? So to grow in the virtue is to become a better human. Whereas the solutions of contraception and then abortion, those are about trying to conquer our nature that actually unleashes our will and our desires and kind of forgoes the need for virtue anyway.

So in the second wave, which was in the late '60s but mainly in the 1970s, that's when you see this alliance of the abortion movement, the acceptance of contraception. And that's when I would say that feminism really began to adopt that implicit masculine bias where basically femaleness is scapegoated for what oppresses women. And so a second wave feminist had this idea -- they made this distinction between sex and gender where

sex refers to biology, so I'm my femaleness, whereas gender is a social construct.

So woman is more of a fiction created by society and it's oppressive construct that we need to break free from, right? But sex is real and we need to kind of deal with that. That was kind of the second wave view. So Judith Butler, who begins writing on this in the late '80s but really becomes prominent in the '90s, her big idea is basically to say not only is gender a social construct, but sex itself.

So our categorization of human beings into two sexes that are complementary in terms of biology and personhood is a social fiction rather than a matter of fact. So what she basically does is she says everything's gender. Like sex, even sex itself is gender.

Everything's gender and that is an oppressive construct that's put upon us by society. And so our role then is to basically be gadflies. It's to kind of rebel against this construct.

She actually has a very kind of pessimistic view of how much human beings can do that. She has a very like social power, has a hugely determining impact on us. So the best you can kind of do is to play with gender, to queer gender.

You can't necessarily overthrow it, but you can kind of constantly contest it. You kind of like to rip off the mask, basically. She's like, okay, genders, genders, just this illusion.

Just performative. Exactly. It's a performance.

You're playing, right. It's basically drag. She makes this analogy.

That what's revolutionary about drag, she argues, is that it reveals that all of gender is drag. We're all performing drag all the time. Anyway, so that's her big idea.

And yes, I would say that basically gender theory and gender studies. I would say is applied Judith Butler. It just takes her theories as truth and then kind of analyzes different aspects of culture in light of those theories.

So you can't really go away from Judith Butler when it comes to her influence, I guess, in gender theory. Let me read back to you one of your definitions here. What's really good? We're talking with Abigail about the genesis of gender.

Oh, there we go. And what you do really well, you interweave your own story. In contrast to some of the impenetrable prose, you write very well and you explain very complicated, often ill-defined terms and you do it very well.

So for example, you say about postmodernism is the worldview that sees reality as narratives created by human beings rather than an order of objective reality discovered by human beings. That's a really helpful people can understand that. Obviously, there's lots of complications in French philosophy in there, but that's at the heart of it.

You say later, this is really good. Divine. The alternative, Christian view, divine speech makes reality, human speech identifies reality.

In postmodernism in verse that, well, there is no divine speech. Human speech simply makes reality. And then to get to gender paradigm, which you've just laid out very well, you say according to the gender paradigm, there is no creator and we're free to create ourselves.

The body is an object with no intrinsic meaning. We give it whatever meaning we want using technology to undo what is perceived to be natural. We do not receive meaning from God or about our bodies or the world.

We impose it. So you say later that without, I mean, this is not exaggerated rhetoric. You rightly point out that that gender paradigm is godless.

What do you mean in saying it's godless? That may sound like just a Christian shot across about. It's actually a factual statement. What do you mean? Yes, I mean that the role of creator has been kind of excised and that human beings take that role.

So in a godful reality, you have a ground of all existence. You also have a ground of all meaning. And that means that human beings are creatures rather than creators.

But if you get that god out of there, then in a sense, it's human beings who then take the role of being god. So we then get to decide the terms of our existence. We get to decide what meaning our body has.

We get to use a language in a way that constructs the kind of reality that we want to have. So if you look at the role of god, especially in the Genesis creation narratives, and then the role of the human individual in the gender paradigm, they basically serve the same role. So in the gender paradigm, human beings aren't creatures.

We don't receive the fact of our existence and the meaning of our existence from god. But there is no meaning aside from what we assign things. So yeah, and you talk about this, that one of the worst things you could be in feminist theory is an essentialist.

Someone who believes that there's an essence, a nature, there's an is-ness. And yet, talk about the inconsistency or certainly seeming inconsistency with the trans movement, which the T has been put on the LG and B and whether they actually go together or not. But there's an implicit essentialist narrative when someone says, "Well, I'm a man trapped in a woman's body.

I'm really a man, though my body assigned at birth was female." That's an essentialist narrative that says there is an essence. It's not just performative. You really have a maleness or a femaleness, what they're turning on its head is whether it's given or whether it's biological or it's some sort of internal sense of being.

So talk about how does that essentialist narrative get undermined and how does it keep reasserting itself? Yeah, so this is such a fascinating question that has really perplexed me because if you think about the gender theory according to Judith Butler that I just described, she is completely anti-essentialist. So her theories actually do not jive well with some of the transgender anthropology or the narratives about trans identities, which do assert an essence. So I've been thinking, "How do we get from there? How do we get from basically gender is a social construct to gender is profoundly real and it's this inner sense of identity that in fact could be at odds with my socialization?" Because those are two very different concepts.

There's this implicit contradiction there. And so one of the things that I think has happened is that Judith Butler's work and then how it kind of metastasized through culture, it really clears the deck of sexual difference. It basically says, "Sex is a construct or we don't have to really take seriously the idea that men and that maleness and femaleness is grounded in reality." But what's interesting is that I think human beings are, it's like Aristotle says, all human beings by nature desire to know.

And we intuitively see that the world is real and we want to make claims about what is real. So I think two things are happening. One, I think for probably most people, we have this intuitive sense of essentialism to claim that things are real.

Most people aren't hardcore social constructionists. Like most people won't be like, "Yeah, everything's a construct." So you do have those ideologues who are like, "Yeah, everything's a construct. So I'm going to assert that I'm male and just by asserting it, that means it's true because language makes reality." But then I think for a lot of people, it's actually much more possible that there is this kind of sex of the psyche or even the brain as it sometimes put, that is it odds with the sex of the body and that that's the real essence of who someone is.

So basically, I think gender theory created this gap. And then this idea of what I call gender identity theory has kind of snuck in to fill that gap. But it wouldn't work without that denaturalizing effort that like, eclipse of the reality of sex and basically supplanting the idea of human nature altogether.

So how are, because you go on, you talk about Judith Butler and then you talk about Kimberly Crenshaw and the advent of intersectionality and it's easy to think. All of these things are just, especially if you're a conservative Christian of some kind, you can just think. These are all progressive ideas that are out there.

They're all kind of the same. They're all kind of on the same team. So you get into the weeds and then you realize, "Well, there's some pretty significant difference and they don't all see the same thing." And that's true with intersectionality.

So give us a layman's level, laywoman's level of explanation of intersectionality and does

it fit with Judith Butler's project? Sure. So intersectionality is basic, and it's most basic level, like when Crenshaw first started writing about it. It is the idea that there's similar to this idea that human identity is primarily constructed by society.

And so people who inhabit different kinds of identities that are constructed by society, such as race and gender, they have this intersectionality or in other words, the constructs kind of intersect in a certain way. So that way you can't just talk about women. You have to also take into account the category of say race or class.

So it's this like basically this precision, right? The way in which these different identity constructs overlap, especially in the life of a particular person or a particular group of people. Now Crenshaw was talking very narrowly, at least in her first article where she introduces this idea about legal discrimination. So she's a legal scholar.

So she's basically like, "Look, we can't just talk about sex discrimination and racial discrimination. We have to look at the ways in which for say black women, both kinds of discrimination can intersect in their lives." So the basic idea actually is, I think it's a helpful analytical tool, especially when we're thinking about law, to think about, "Oh yes, that's true. There are ways in which our identities intersect." I also talk about intersects.

I'm going to ask you about that. Yeah. Okay.

Yeah. One of my critiques of intersectionality or intersectionalism maybe as an ideology is that it actually is blind to the ways in which intersectionality, for example, affects groups that are seen as privileged, right? So I think I give this anecdote in the book where I'm like biking home from my posh academic job. Clearly I have a healthy body because I'm biking.

I'm about to go home to a warm house with dinner and a healthy family. When I pass this man who's limping really hard and going the opposite direction, and my guess is that he's probably just gone to the free supper at our parish, which is nearby. And so he's a white man, right? So in intersectionalism, he would be cast as privileged, like top of the hierarchy, right? But he's limping.

He's clearly physically disabled. He class wise looks very, it's like someone who's really poor and who needs to go to a free meal at a parish. So like intersectionalism can't really compute how that person actually is far more oppressed, you might say, than myself, right, this woman.

So I think it's the kind of the hierarchy that is built out of intersectionality as a basic idea into this ideology that's the problem because it actually blinds us to certain kinds of oppression. Which is just by, oh, we don't even need to care about white men. Well, what about this white man, right? Who clearly, yeah.

So that's kind of my critique. That's helpful. And you talk about that in the book that

often the classes may be given sort of a wave, but really there's the word wave again, different kind of wave.

Yeah, like a hand wave. A hand wave. But really it's usually people who we would say are very privileged with their academic training, with the jobs they have, who are discussing these sort of things, and who have to use the language.

Lots of class privilege, but that often doesn't come in. One of my critiques, I'm not an expert in critical theory or intersectionality, but your point is there can be just some common sense helpfulness to remind us that people have multiple sort of factors in their life and they may even be, you know, in different ways, discriminated against in different levels and they may intersect. So that's a fine observation.

One of my critiques is it's a very modern, or you might say, postmodern truncated set of identities that you, so people say, well, even sometimes I get this as a reformed, as a Calvinist who believes in total depravity. Well, shouldn't it be our position? We believe that people are inherently sinful. And so shouldn't we expect that people in power tend to oppress people who don't have power? And I say, yeah, we should not be surprised to see that.

One of my criticisms, however, is that who has power, who doesn't have power, that access is not just a straight line from these three race sex gender orientation down to the people who have a different kind of race sex gender orientation. There's lots of ways to have power, you know, athletic ability, victimhood, it confers a certain kind of power. So the intersection and the DEI sort of way that we need to show to people, we need to give a representation of what the world is like, sounds very good, but it's impossible to achieve and it's almost always a truncated list of identities.

For example, when our kids went to the public school and they go to our Christian school now, but I was on our public school's sex education committee, which was like ground zero for there was still a law in Michigan when we lived there. I think it's still on the books, but a law that you needed to have a clergy member on your district's sex education committee, just a holdover law that was still there. Now they almost always got very liberal clergy members who volunteered for this, but somebody, I think it was a Mormon somewhere in the administration was like, come here, I hear you, Mike, do you want to be on this? And that sort of environment, I'd see somebody who was a Muslim and I think, oh, this person is going to be an ally, this person is going to be maybe beyond the same page.

But I remember, you know, getting these arguments in this group and it would be, we need our sex education curriculum needs. We don't want anybody who's in the classroom to feel like their kind of family is left out. For example, of lesbian couples, we need to have, you know, threesome couples, we need to have lots of different LGBT, we need to have a trans couple family.

Okay, well, there's lots of reasons why I wouldn't go with that. But one of the most obvious is for all of the talk of representation and the intersection of these identities, I'd say there's nowhere in any of this sex education curriculum that anyone ever goes to church. You never have anyone who has a big family.

I mean, so there are lots of people who you are not thinking to represent. So it sounds very good. We want to represent all people in our district.

But it really falls short of that. How do you think, what sort of, let's move just a little bit, we got maybe just 15 minutes left. What are things that we can do because we don't, you know, we want to understand and we want to rightly criticize.

What are things on the positive end? If people are listening to this and they go, wow, Abigail, this is really good. You're really helpful. I look out in our world and I see, you know, trans influencers on Bud Light and, you know, it's so ridiculous on a lot of levels.

Some of them is for, it is the essentialist narrative because you have Dylan Mulvaney saying, well, I'm performing as a woman, but it's the most over the top stereotype of what a girl would be. Just enamored with pink everything. It's just you say in the book, all we have left then, if we don't have any biology, all we have are stereotypes.

What are you doing positively in, you know, could be an intellectual way? Could be just living your life to try to push back on this paradigm, which is, as you so rightly say, godless. Yeah, that's a great question. And that's, I think where my work is really focused right now at the moment.

So I think one helpful distinction to make is between the paradigm and the framework, which we do need to critique and the people, like the individual human person who might, for whatever reason, identify into that framework. So we can't forget the dignity and the immortal soul of that person that needs God's love. We can't, as Christians, we just can't forget that.

And so I think making a distinction between those two things is really important. So this book in many ways is focused on a kind of articulation and critique of that framework, which I do think needs to happen, right? But then it's important to remember that the individual person might not even consciously believe all of the things that the gender paradigm asserts, right? So I mean, I think some, like I think about the language in Genesis when the fall first happens and the first thing that the man and the woman do is they hide from one another, right? And I think in many ways the gender paradigm has provided Western culture with another way of hiding from the truth of who we are, another way of hiding from the truth of our sexual identity. And so when it comes to the level of the person, it's about like, what's, you know, like when you're accompanying someone or just getting to know someone, like figuring out what's going on in this person's heart? Like what, what about them? Why are they seeking refuge here? Right?

Because there's a, there's a certain, you know, it's, it's meeting some kind of need or addressing some kind of wound, right? So I can't, we can't just move from like critiquing the framework to then a rejection of the people who are, especially I think who are still trying to, you know, who are still drawn to Christianity, but also have found in this framework some kind of explanation for their experience.

So we need to meet the person. And I think if I were to kind of distill the problem that's happening is like we've forgotten to listen to the voice of nature and the voice of God. And I feel like the voice of nature here, I don't mean like the trees.

I mean the, our nature that we have human nature. And that's something that is true about intersectionalism, right? It's a denaturalized view of the human person. It sees the human person as like just kind of a, something that's externally constructed by a society.

And I think we then need to resist those kinds of narratives and return to an understanding of human dignity. So all human persons share in this common human dignity. There is also the level of, you might say like identity groups, like for example, the most prominent one, most important one I would say is sexual difference.

Like we have to think about men and women as at the level of nature, there is a distinction there. And that was God's idea. That's right.

Right. But then there's also the level of the individual human person, right? So we really need to resist this like us them dynamic. I would say it's important to steward the voices that are in our head because we are so, human beings are so profoundly shaped by what we consume.

So in terms of like social media, in terms of news media, I mean, the most prominent voice in your head should be the voice of the Lord, right? So you need to be primarily formed by, by scripture, by the gospels, by prayer and not by, you know, influences online or social media wars or whatever news media you even have it. Because those sorts of things depend upon like disrupting our peace, right? And I think when our culture is so polarized and so politicized that if that's the discourse that's forming us, then we're going to lose sight of the person because we're just going to be caught up in kind of a culture war. So that's really good.

Yeah. And I think you made this point in the article that you wrote last year on the Matt Walsh documentary, What is a Woman? And if I recall, you're largely appreciative of what it's trying to dismantle and the critiques it's trying to make. But one, and I haven't seen it and I know lots of people who haven't really appreciate it.

So I would expect that I would appreciate what that documentary, which has been free over the weekend, what it's trying to point out. And yeah, I think your a little bit of pushback was one, it didn't quite answer the question, what is a woman? And two, this is

your point of dignity that while there's, you know, there is a place for pointing out when arguments are ridiculous, there's a place to show that they're ridiculous. And I think there's a place for satire, I think there's a place for extreme.

But you sort of say it can feel like we just want to be careful that we don't just set it up and say, ah, wow, I feel good. This is look at how dumb people are. And this is really going to be hard for for Bible believing Christians.

It's going to be really hard for, you know, serious Catholics like yourself to make sure that while we point out that the ideology is often ridiculous or irrational, that the people, so the ideas don't deserve our compassion, but people certainly do. And that's going to be very hard to do at times. I want to come full circle, just a couple more questions if you have time along these lines.

I do need to mention one other, I'm supposed to mention this mid episode, but trust me, Abigail, we're very close to being done, not mid episode, but just thank Desiring God or other sponsor. Did you read any John Piper books back in your, your adventure? I'm sure, at some point, yeah. But I think I might have read them in my angry feminist face.

I'm going to say is I've been like, ah, yeah. Okay. Let me go back.

So this is just mentioned John's look at the book online Bible study videos. John does these. He's done it for so many books and it's him doing word studies and doing grammatical semantic analysis.

So go on there. You can find them desiring God.org or on YouTube. Thank you to desiring God.

So I want to talk about comeback and so you've come back and you were receiving the Catholic Church in 2014, grew up as an evangelical. And if you don't mind, I'm going to, I'm going to, I'm going to probe a little bit to see what of those evangelical convictions you, you've regained or which ones you haven't. So I got two questions in particular.

You say at the beginning that you grew up with a, you know, typical maybe, and maybe it was given, I don't know what church and maybe it was in a, in overly rigid way or maybe it was given in a not very, maybe an ahistorical way, but you talk about the, you know, male headship, female submission. So one, do you see that that's biblical? Do you see, do you, how do you resonate or, or not with that? Because I would say, well, that's, that's a fusions five rightly understood. And then if I can point out one thing that I, I flagged in the book, it's a great book, but when you said that Genesis, and I, I almost entirely agree with what you're drawing out of Genesis, but you said, Oh, Genesis was, this was the Pentateuch was put together sometime later during the Babylonian exile.

And I wanted to say, no, no, Moses wrote the Pentateuch. So, you know, what, what did, you know, is that something you've, you've thought about what role, one way to get at

both of those questions is what role now as a Catholic since 2014 does the Bible play in everything that you believe in what you're trying to, to do and accomplish with all of your, you know, very impressive intellectual learning. And you do a great job of dismantling and understanding and you have a lot from, from people in cyclical appropriately so for your tradition, tell me about the role the Bible plays.

There's a good evangelical pastor question for you. I love it. I, so I think that the, the Bible plays an enormously important role, not only in this intellectual work, but just in my own personal spiritual life.

So, you know, every morning I spend time and prayer meditating on the gospel for the day. So I, I think that in my life as a Catholic, my interaction with scripture has a lot, is more prayerful in a way than it was. So it's not just about analysis, which I think has been helpful because I have, I'm a very analytical person.

So I love to just kind of, you know, you could tell like with Genesis, right? Like I'm like, you know, parsing these verses and trying to get it like the deep meaning in them. But I think there's also, you know, scripture is a way of hearing the voice of God. And so, um, in a, in a prayer.

So I think the main difference though is that now for me, scripture comes in the context of an authoritative interpretive tradition, right? So it's not just up to me to interpret scripture, but rather I can enter into this interpretive tradition that not only has, um, carried the canon of scripture, but also has shown us how to read it truthfully and how it should be interpreted. Right. So I think that's something that's different.

Um, whereas, you know, when I was an evangelical, it was, it was a little more like, you know, you would kind of make your, you know, your best effort, like what you were even just describing John Piper. It's like get the best information you can and make the best kind of prayerful and, um, factual, you know, interpretation of a passage that you can. And then that's sort of like the best you can do.

Cause then you, you end up with these vying interpretations of scripture, right? So I found it to be very helpful to have an interpretive tradition to where if I'm looking at a verse and I'm like, yeah, it could be read this way, but then often there are resources in the tradition that help me and integrate it into the full kind of picture. Um, so on that note, like you mentioned female headship and female submission, right? So one, one thing I would critique about the tradition I grew up in is a reading of the fall and how the relationship between men and women are described as prescriptive rather than a departure from the ideal that we now actually through the grace of God have to sort of wrestle with. Um, so this, the line in Genesis three that your, you know, that God says to the woman, your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you.

Right. So I've seen that verse kind of plucked out and then imposed as this like God-

normed ideal. And I think, and this again is speaking from not only my own take, but also just the interpretive tradition that, um, that I have in the church is that that's actually, it's describing a consequence of the fall.

So this is how a distorted relationship between the sexes will look like and how it will play out in the world. Right. So then Ephesians five, I think shows, um, a description of how when like through the grace of Christ, that fall and dynamic is restored what it should look like.

Right. Um, so I, I agree like when correctly interpreted, I, you know, I used to, you know, where with Ephesians five, I'd be like, this is all a success. Right.

So beautiful. Right. Um, so I think headship also needs to be understood more, I think as generosity, like to be ahead, it's almost like to be a source.

Like if we think about what it means for say in the Trinity for the father to be the head of the Trinity, right? What that means is really like this generative source of life of everything. Right. So what does it look like for say a husband in marriage to be this generative source that allows the full flourishing of everyone in the family.

And that often looks like a kind of self sacrifice, like a loving self sacrifice, right? Which is how he images, he images God. So, um, I don't, I don't, I think it needs to be kind of rightly interpreted. Um, but we don't need to be afraid of it.

You know, I get frustrated sometimes when Ephesians five comes up in the lecture. And, you know, sometimes with longer readings, there's like, you can choose to read this longer reading or an excerpt. And sometimes people will like cut out the bit about women submitting to husbands and just read the thing about the husband.

And that really frustrates me because I'm like, no, it's both and like you have to have that, that reciprocity, right? Um, and, uh, yeah. So I think scripture is profoundly important. And that's why in fact I put so much emphasis on the text of Genesis because I believe that it still speaks the truth about who we are and what we're made for, especially its focus on sexual difference in those first few chapters.

Um, so that's a great answer. It's a great way to end it. I agreed with 85% said there.

So we won't make it the, uh, the, the Protestant Catholic discussion on, uh, but I will say this to, to agree that in, in, I think the, the best of a reformed or even just a Protestant understanding of scripture that we try to make the distinction between solo scriptura, which is a Protestant affirmation that the final, the final authority is the word of God and a, a naive solo scripture or a new to scripture that all we have is the Bible by itself, a kind of naive primitivism that, you know, I think you said in, in your book that this sense that, you know, we just, uh, the early church happened and then my church and Charlotte and North Carolina happened and nothing else really happened. We're just

getting right back to, well, that's, that's not possible. That's not practicable.

So I think the, the best of the Protestant tradition wants to affirm that we read with a great cloud of witnesses and we read with the understanding of creeds and confessions and councils and, and a great cloud of, and I would just say my, so my middle child Mary, um, we Protestants, we'd like the name Mary too. It's a good name. And her, her middle name is Ida Let, which most people don't know what that's from.

It was John Calvin's wife. So there you could, you could have, you could have been a Protestant and still it's just a different sort of saintly tradition. So yeah, thank you for writing this book.

Once again, uh, Abigail Favali, the genesis of gender. Are you working on a new book? What, what are your, your writing pursuits these days? So I, I have a book. I'm working on it in my mind.

Um, and I haven't really started actually writing it. But I am really in the Catholic tradition. We at least later in the legacy of John Paul II, there's language about the feminine genius.

And so I kind of want to write a book about the masculine genius and the feminine genius. Like what, what do these actually mean? What does fallen masculinity and fallen femininity look like? What does redeemed and generative masculinity and femininity look like and trying to, to give some more substantive account that's beyond just, again, like not just wanting to critique. Like I think this, I think we actually have an opportunity as Christians right now to further develop our theology of sexual difference, um, in ways that are, are more about inviting people into this beautiful vision and not just kind of critiquing.

Um, yeah. Yeah. Because it's easy to look out and think these are the worst of times, but you could also say that it's the best of opportunities because obviously people that there are a lot of people are looking for something different.

What was this, this poll I just saw last week that less than 50% of Gen Z men think feminism has been good for our world or something or might have just been good for men. I forget that that question, how you word it makes a difference. But that tells us, uh, people are sensing some things, not not working.

The answers that are out there and there's a reason, now I say this all the time, there's a reason that young men in particular are, you know, from Jordan Peterson to an, an Andrew Tate who I don't recommend, you know, they're, they're looking for somebody to give them a give, can I be a man? What does masculinity look like? And if, if the church is not giving a beautiful picture of what that looks like, somebody else will give a twisted view of that. Exactly. Yeah, which is, which is the task before us.

And thank you for the work that you're doing and look forward, hopefully to, to meeting in person sometime. And we have Carl Truman as a mutual friend and we probably have, have others. So thank you for the work that you're doing.

And once again, the Genesis of gender and to all of our listeners until next time, glorify God, enjoy him forever and read a good book.

[MUSIC]