

# Foundational Essay

## HONOR GOD’S DIVERSITY

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### INTRODUCTION

When you read the Bible closely, you can see that one of its amazing qualities is how its pages embrace a great diversity of voices. From one book to another—and even within a single book—the Bible is able to hold diverse genres, contexts, perspectives, and even theologies together. A beautiful example of this is at the very beginning of the Bible where we have, not one, but two creation stories back to back. Their mere presence testifies to a biblical valuing of diversity, and the content of these stories actually shows us some important principles about honoring God’s diversity.

On the one hand, the first chapter of Genesis presents the familiar story of creation in seven days wherein God systematically sets up the various realms where life can thrive before creating each living thing “according to its kind.” From the first couple of verses onward, we are inspired by the God who takes a watery chaos and calls order, structure, meaning, and even life to emerge from that chaos. Amidst all that God creates, we can appreciate the great diversity and value of all creation in the differences among every little piece of creation that God intentionally names as *good*. Among this diversity, humans receive a special mention in that we are not described as “according to their kind.” Instead, we have the unique distinction of being the final created beings who are all made “in our image,” the very “image of God” (Genesis 1:26–27).

On the other hand, the second chapter of Genesis begins a very different creation story. The LORD God (not just God) does the creating; rather than transform a watery chaos, the LORD God plants a well-watered garden in a lifeless desert; instead of meticulously organized order, the LORD God’s method is trial-and-error; the sequence of creating beings is different from the first story; and, rather than emphasize likeness to God, the story depicts the first human as of the same substance as the reddish-brown soil known throughout the highlands of ancient Israel.

The fact that the Bible holds these stories together (even side by side) while they each testify to a different perspective on God, creation, and humanity serves as a model for how we might honor God’s diversity by setting up spaces that invite a plethora of voices to be valued. When we look at the content of these stories, we can see that honoring God’s diversity can

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also be understood as balancing a broad focus with a more narrow focus. In the broader focus, the first creation story equips Christians with the more general theological affirmation that *all humans* are made in the image of God. But the second creation story balances this wide view with a story of how the first two humans were created in a specific setting (of major rivers nourishing Northwest Africa and Southeast Asia) and with descriptors (as being made from reddish-brown earth) applied to them that distinctively affirm the value of the brown people who identify with this region and these features.


Just as the biblical text honors God's diversity in its many perspectives and in the balance that is struck between the broad and the specific, we are called to honor God's diversity in ways that balance broad inclusivity with specific foci. To truly honor God's diversity, the acknowledgment and praise of the diversity that we see in the Bible, creation, or our communities is one step. But it is not the end goal. *Honoring* diversity, as opposed to just *seeing* or *having* diversity, requires the difficult work of striving toward justice and equality. I believe that the following four central principles can guide us down a path of truly *honoring* God's diversity. We must:

- Affirm people who are marginalized
- Center voices from the margins
- Work for liberation while challenging oppression
- Use advantages to overturn inequality


## AFFIRM PEOPLE WHO ARE MARGINALIZED

As noted in the introduction, Genesis 1:27 presents a beautiful celebration of the value of humanity: "So God created humankind in his image, / in the image of God he created them; / male and female he created them." This verse is often used to introduce people to a biblical perspective on valuing diversity. However, for the fullness of God's inclusivity to emanate from our hearts, we must be intentional with how we interpret this seemingly straightforward passage. There are three practices in the history and present of Christian biblical interpretation that we need to be careful to counteract when we interpret this verse. With each of these practices, we can see that turning our attention toward affirming those who are traditionally marginalized is the key to bringing about a loving application of this passage.

The first practice we need to avoid is the extremely common Christian tendency to affirm only God's masculinity and, thus, ignore what this text clearly states. The passage literally describes "male and female" as in the image of God. Yet, a common Christian practice is to only and always refer to God with masculine pronouns (he, him, his) or—if we want to be more inclusive—gender-neutral pronouns. The main problem with this practice is that our repetition of "he, him, his" to refer to God engrains a valuing of that which is male as being more godly (holy, authoritative, valuable). When we use only gender-neutral language to refer to God, then we don't change the already engrained association in people's minds between God and male; we simply avoid reiterating it. But this verse offers us the opportunity for an alternative path. If we are intentional to apply what it says, then it grants us the license to explicitly refer to God as female as often as we mention her. Can you imagine the transformation in the minds of people—and especially children—of all genders when they hear God referred to as *she* over and over?



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A second practice that we must counteract with this verse is the potential to read the passage in the most restrictive—as opposed to the most inclusive—possible way. Although the text literally says “male and female” in reference to humankind, we know from science that biological sexes do not neatly fit a binary of male or female. Experience also tells us that the categories of gender identity that people live out cannot be confined to the two options “male and female.” We must affirm unequivocally that trans people are in the image of God. We must affirm that the phrase “male and female, she created them in the image of God” is inclusive of intersex people, people of all genders, and people who ascribe to no gender identification; the Scripture passage does not restrict humanity to those who neatly fit our assumptions about sex assigned at birth and our constructions of gender binaries. Doing so is not a great stretch of meaning for the passage. Throughout Genesis 1, we know that the repeated phrase “there was evening, and there was morning” serves as a shorthand to include the entirety of day, not to nonsensically say that there was no dawn, daytime, noon, afternoon, dusk, nighttime, or midnight. We know to read that language in the most inclusive way possible, and our task of honoring God’s diversity entails that we likewise need to be intentionally inclusive in our understanding of all the variation of humanity along with a special calling to affirm those who are traditionally excluded or marginalized.

The third practice that we must counteract is the historical tendency of Christians to relativize the significance of this biblical text by upholding the authority of other passages that limit, marginalize, and oppress people. Slavery apologists of the past have loved the Bible passages that treat slavery as normative and demand obedience from the enslaved (see Ephesians 6:5; Colossians 3:22; 1 Timothy 6:1). Thus, they would work to relativize the importance of Genesis 1:27 by arguing that Black people are beasts and not fully human, or that being in the image of God does not guarantee freedom. Colonizers have pointed to the precedent of genocidal texts (such as Deuteronomy 20:16–17) as a guide for arguing that there is no contradiction between believing that we are all made in the image of God and also believing that God wants us (as God’s chosen people) to wipe out the non-believers. Such approaches to the Bible may sound like barbaric, outdated vestiges from our past that are no longer in vogue. But many Christians today still tend to relativize the significance of Genesis 1:27 by arguing that men alone are authorized to lead and preach (see 1 Corinthians 11:2–16; 14:34–35; 1 Timothy 2:11–12). If we want to truly honor God’s diversity, then we cannot relativize the importance of Genesis 1:27 by holding tightly to Bible verses that limit, marginalize, and oppress people; instead, we must hold tightly to Genesis 1:27 as the standard.

## CENTER VOICES FROM THE MARGINS

Sometimes, when we read about the worst forms of exclusionary practices in Christian history, we compartmentalize this history as typical of *them*, not part of who *we* are. Surely it makes us more comfortable to believe that we are on the right side of history, and if we are not promoting racist, genocidal, sexist, or heterosexist language, then we can rest assured or even celebrate that we are honoring God’s diversity. However, I would caution us before we too easily pat ourselves on the back. If we are honest about what we see in the Gospels, we can find that even Jesus—in all his radical inclusivity—erred when it comes to honoring God’s diversity. As we turn to

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the example of when Jesus got it wrong, I hope that we can open our hearts to humbly accept that we too likely have oppressive practices and beliefs that we should closely interrogate. I also hope that, like Jesus in the biblical text, we can be open to correction and learn to see how centering the voices from the margins can serve to uplift the entire Christian community.

In Matthew 15:21–28, Jesus tries to withdraw from the inundation of attention he has received, so he travels to the region of Tyre and Sidon, a Gentile area slightly north of his Jewish homeland. While he is there, a Canaanite woman comes to him.<sup>1</sup> As a woman, she enters into a power imbalance in her interaction with Jesus. But the fact that she is described as a Canaanite generates a further obstacle. She is identified as a member of the aboriginal population of the land, and in the story of the Bible (as in our modern context of the United States) the colonizers believed that God had ordained for them to annihilate these indigenous occupants to manifest their destiny as inheritors of God’s promised land (see Exodus 23:23; 34:11; Deuteronomy 7:1–2; 20:16–17).

Many biblical scholars argue that the anti-Canaanite genocide depicted as God’s will in these texts never happened. Archaeology does not provide evidence that Israelites engaged in a massive military conquest, slaughtering the native people of Canaan. But if this violence did not happen, then how did it get into our Bible? In short, the Jews suffering in exile during the sixth century BCE imagined that their present circumstance would have been avoided if they had killed all the proximate people that could tempt them toward apostasy way back in the fourteenth–twelfth centuries BCE. It is an ugly theology, but it is also one that Jesus would likely have grown up learning from his Scriptures.

When Jesus encounters this Canaanite woman pleading for him to attend to the suffering of her daughter, Jesus addresses her from a perspective informed by this ugly theology. He completely ignores her like the divinely sanctioned genocidal biblical texts that disregard the value of Canaanite suffering (v. 23). In Matthew’s Gospel, even Jesus (in his humanity) seems to have been influenced by the prejudiced ideologies of his upbringing.

Because the woman persists, Jesus’ disciples prompt him to summarily cast her away, and Jesus complies by informing the woman that he was sent “only to the lost sheep of Israel” (v. 24). When the woman continues to press Jesus further, his subsequent rejection is patently insulting: “It is not right to take the children’s bread and feed it to the dogs!” (v. 26). Yet this woman is not deterred. She turns Jesus’ analogy on its head by deconstructing his words as based on an economy of scarcity that actually plays out according to an economy of sufficiency in her real-world experience. Actually, she retorts, “even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” This response earns the woman a healing for her daughter.

There is much that we can learn from the model of this oppressed woman responding with sass.<sup>2</sup> But the significance of this event for Jesus’

1. Mark 7:24–30 presents a parallel version of this story. However, the woman is described as Greek and Syrophenician in Mark and the dialogue is slightly different.
2. See Mitzi J. Smith, “Race, Gender, and the Politics of ‘Sass’: Reading Mark 7:24–30 through a Womanist Lens of Intersectionality and Inter(con)textuality,” in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*, ed. Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2016), 95–112; also in Mitzi J. Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 28–45.

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ministry is also something that we should not overlook. Looking at Mark's version of this story, Mitzi Smith states that "Jesus' consciousness is raised as a result of the woman's sass."<sup>3</sup> As we move through the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' vocabulary around children has more inclusiveness than it did before. In Matthew's account, one can see that Jesus' ministry culminates with him learning from the truth spoken by this woman; he tells his followers to "make disciples of all nations" (28:19), not just the lost sheep of Israel. By the end of the Gospel, Jesus has not only heeded her perspective, but *centered* her theology as the purpose of his movement!

While it is valuable to specifically affirm the image of God in all people, centering the voices of those who are most marginalized brings to the surface the tensions between our claim to value diversity and the real, lived experience of people who can evaluate our efforts. Honoring God's diversity requires that we heed the marginalized voices in a way that we grow to center such perspectives, not in a way that creates new hegemonies with different faces, but so that the locales of power can be diffused equitably.

### WORK FOR LIBERATION WHILE CHALLENGING OPPRESSION

It may seem counterintuitive to look closely at a discomfiting, exclusionary, ugly biblical text when seeking to learn how to honor God's diversity. Perhaps, the previous passage (in which Jesus espouses some prejudiced language) seems unsettling enough. But at least that passage demonstrated Jesus learning from his experience. Now we will turn to 1 Timothy 2:11–15, verses that lack any such redeeming value in growth or development of a more open perspective. And yet, I believe that attention to these ugly verses—or more specifically, attention to *how one reads* these ugly verses—can help us to learn what it means to honor God's diversity. By centering the perspective of a person who countered attacks from those who weaponized 1 Timothy 2:11–15, we can see that honoring God's diversity requires ways of reading that bring about liberation and challenge oppression.

First Timothy 2:11–12 issues an unequivocal call to impose (or maintain) inequality based on gender: "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent." Verses 13–15 *explain* this precept as a natural outgrowth of how the author reads Genesis 2–3. What is your initial reaction to a text like this? One of my favorite professors in graduate school told me that passages like this would make him want to throw the Bible across the church. Some of us might want to carefully consider the literary context that surrounds the passage or the historical context in which the author was living. Maybe these factors can make the passage more understandable and, frankly, more palatable. Ultimately, however, I don't think that discarding the Bible works for Christians nor do I believe that rationalizing an oppressive text brings about a church or society that truly honors God's diversity.

I see a different path modeled in how a brilliant nineteenth-century Christian in the US navigated through passages like this that were weaponized against her. She was an activist, an abolitionist, and an evangelist. She was a free Black person in a country that used the Bible to argue that her race was degenerate and deserving of enslavement, and she was an outspoken woman in a society that used passages like this one to

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3. Smith, "Race, Gender, and the Politics of 'Sass,'" 40.



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state that she had no right to speak with authority over a man. Her name was Maria Stewart, and she may have been the first woman public speaker of any race to publicly address an audience of mixed gender in the US. In her “Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston,” we can see how she deftly utilizes the Bible to state her case against detractors who would want to limit her by appealing to texts like 1 Timothy 2:11–15:

What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did [God] not raise up Deborah to be a mother and a judge in Israel? Did not Queen Esther save the lives of the Jews? And Mary Magdalene first declare the resurrection of Christ from the dead? Come, said the woman of Samaria, and see a man that hath told me all the things that ever I did; is this not the Christ? St. Paul declared that it was a shame for a woman to speak in public, yet our great High Priest and Advocate did not condemn the woman for a more notorious offense than this; neither will he condemn this worthless worm. . . . Did St. Paul but know of our wrongs and deprivations, I presume he would make no objection to our pleading in public for our rights.<sup>4</sup>

Her opponents would question how Stewart can defy the plain sense of a biblical prohibition on women speaking, preaching, or teaching. Stewart, however, “flips the script,” so to speak. First, she counters that the debate is not between her word and the Word of God, but between different biblical visions for the role of women that are present when one juxtaposes Deborah, Esther, Mary, and the Samaritan woman against a passage like 1 Timothy 2:11–15. Stewart frames the issue such that her opponents are questioning God’s track record and consistency. In this sense, most of Stewart’s rhetoric seems to share with her opponents a single *hermeneutic*—that is, the way they read the Bible and make meaning from it—while diverging with regard to the specific interpretation. Both seemingly appeal to the Bible as an ancient precedent establishing divine norms we should follow. However, the final sentence from the above quotation reveals how Stewart’s hermeneutic actually *differs* from that of her detractors.

The final sentence of the quotation makes it clear that the difference is not about only which texts one prefers, but a fundamental difference in how she makes meaning from texts. Whereas Stewart’s opponents prioritize the language of 1 Timothy as God’s irrefutable monologue such that meaning must entail obedient submission to the voice in the text, Stewart insists on placing Paul (the presumed author) in dialogue with, not only the rest of the Bible, but more importantly, her ethical evaluation of contemporary injustices. She presumes that Paul could speak a more liberating word to the present world if he were cognizant of the perspectives of Black women and men.

Honoring God’s diversity requires that we follow the lead of Stewart by challenging worldviews and ways of reading Scripture that support oppression. The hermeneutical lens by which the Bible is treated as the transparent, authoritative expression of divine will has functioned to rationalize the status quo and thus maintain thoroughly unjust systems

4. Maria Stewart, “Mrs. Stewart’s Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston,” *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, Milton C. Sernett, ed., 2nd edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 205–05.

of domination. If our goal is to truly honor God's diversity, then we cannot seek to include more diverse people in the existing unjust systems that are upheld by oppressive ideologies. We must learn to adopt ways of reading the text that, informed by the voices of the marginalized, counteract oppression and bring about liberation.


## USE ADVANTAGES TO OVERTURN INEQUALITY

Liberating ways of reading texts can push us toward honoring God's diversity. However, it is also necessary for us to live out the gospel that we profess to be true. The challenge of the "good news" of Jesus Christ can be seen as most revolutionary and liberating in the constant refrain that the first will be last and the last will be first. This is a saying from Jesus that offended the ears of so many who would have heard it. As Christians today, we would like to think that the beliefs and practices of Jesus that proved to be the most challenging to his contemporaries have now become the well-worn path we walk in Christ's name. But, I believe that many, if not most, of us still cringe when we are confronted with the challenge posed by this saying.


One can see this refrain with slightly different nuances at different points in the Synoptic Gospels (see Mark 9:35; 10:42–44; Luke 13:22–30). A parable unique to Luke's Gospel narrates the afterlife while exhibiting this principle even without voicing the refrain (Luke 16:19–31). In addition to this parable (about a fictional rich man whose wealth landed him in Hades and a poor man whose discomfort guaranteed paradise), all three of the Synoptic Gospels share the story of an *actual* rich man who wants to learn from Jesus "what<sup>5</sup> must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16–30; Mark 10:17–31; Luke 18:18–30). As it turns out, this rich man has followed all the ethical obligations that Jesus notes from the commandments. Therefore, Jesus explains that the only step left in order "to be perfect" would be for the rich man to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor. This is an extremely difficult calling for the rich man, because he has great wealth; of course, it is also unsettling for any of us who are comfortable today. Matthew and Mark explain the inherent difficulty in the rich man accepting this calling as the reason for why the first will be last and the last will be first.

By challenging the rich man to redistribute his wealth among the poor, Jesus critiques the systemic injustice that is normative in his society. His call to action prescribes that the primary benefactors of the unjust status quo redistribute their resources in ways that benefit those at the opposite end of the spectrum. The constant refrain is that those who are last—the people who are marginalized by society—will have a promising reversal of fortune, whereas those who are first—the people who are rewarded by society—will now experience torment. But Jesus, like the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, did not predict doom in order to showcase skill at forecasting the future. The goal of such biblical rhetoric has always been to bring about change for all who have ears to hear.

Zacchaeus is one person who stepped up to this challenge of redistributing wealth. His encounter with Jesus engendered a commitment within him to immediately give to the poor "half of my possessions." Simply on the basis of being a benefactor in a context of inequality, Zacchaeus pledged to work toward overturning that inequality. This was his desire




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5. Matthew's Gospel differs from the others by including "good deed" here.

above and beyond an additional commitment to redress his personal wrongs: “if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much” (Luke 19:8). Honoring God’s diversity entails that we are able to follow Zacchaeus’s example when it comes to our advantages in the world.

For followers of Christ, we must understand that honoring God’s diversity is *not* the calculated, self-interested inclusion of various people under the pretense that diversity leads to a better school, better company, or better church. We must understand that the need to honor God’s diversity is our response to a status quo where those who do not fit the *norm* (white, male, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, upper-middle class, Christian) are marginalized from the locus of power and privileges in our society. When it comes to full inclusion in the beloved community, our response to the marginalization of certain people must be the challenge that Jesus poses to the rich man to do and the commitment that Zacchaeus boldly makes. When I take my own advantage—as a male, as cisgender, as heterosexual, as able-bodied—and intentionally work to redistribute the advantages that my advantage has earned me, then I contribute to the type of community that can truly honor God’s diversity in valuing all people.



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## CONCLUSION

Our engagement with one another can truly honor God’s diversity if we are intentional about transforming the ways in which we, or others, harm God’s people. If we can be specific in our affirmations of the full humanity of the most marginalized, we can pointedly counteract the ways our society denigrates people. If we can center voices from the margins, then we can learn from one another in transformative ways. If we can adopt liberating perspectives that challenge systems of oppression, then we can equip ourselves to *Honor God’s Diversity* when confronted with texts that potentially urge Christians to do otherwise. And if we can, like Zacchaeus, willingly use our advantages to counteract inequality—no matter the cost—then perhaps we can make the type of church where Jesus will say, “Today, salvation has come to this house!”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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