

What is Masculinity and Femininity?

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[0 : 0 0] welcome to that'll preach this is brian your host and then we have another great conversation lined up for you we had him on a little bit ago and uh he was uh talking a little bit about how to have uh sane discourse in a in an insane kind of age and he had a lot of wisdom there and a lot of you guys really appreciated his insights so we're bringing him back on again we have dr alastair roberts a newly married man hailing from the united kingdom sporting quite a ferocious beard quite impressive and uh we're glad to have you back on alastair thank you for having me well one of the things that uh we've been anticipating for a while at least i know people who have followed your blog or seen on twitter or followed your daily biblical reflections on youtube is uh the the mythic uh magnum opus of your career errors together right the theology of the sexes talking about what do we mean uh about how do we have a biblical sort of anthropology or an understanding of men and women and uh for those listeners who haven't encountered your work uh do you want to talk about what got you interested in a theology of the sexes what does that even mean and what what kind of got you interested in this project of understanding masculinity and femininity yes um well i never set out to write such a thing in the first place it was something that i was encouraged to do and having read so much on the subject and being frustrated with a lot of the stuff that was out there i thought it would be helpful to write something and in many words i don't see it as some great magnum opus that i'm producing that's a highlight of my career it's not really what i'm about and in some ways that's kind of the point um when we think about a theology of the sexes it's often something that becomes people's focus and my concern is that when that happens we lose a sense of perspective we lose a sense of how this fits into the broader frame of scripture and so my concern has always been primarily to read scripture well and to read it as a full book and to read it thinking about the typology the symbolism to think about the ways in which the story coheres the way in which there are deep uniting themes and there's a coherent message that emerges from it and that is something that i've always wanted to maintain in every area in which i'm exploring theology of the sexes being one of those now when we're talking about the theology of the sexes that's a bit of a misnomer um it suggests that there perhaps that there is something very peculiarly christian about this account and to an extent that's true but what i'm providing is a christian account of the sexes that is not tied to theology proper so much and the sort of study of god and the things of god it's a study of the natural order of things that pertains to our being male and female now that has relevance to all sorts of areas of life areas of society our psychology our politics and also our reading of scripture and various other things like that but my concern has always been to bring that sort of area of study the questions that are involved into it into a frame that is provided by a broader um a way of approaching the world that has an extensive peripheral vision that's not focused narrowly upon the sort of questions that animate us within the current context but is just attentive to reality in its various facets that's

thinking about what is the history of the questions that we're asking why have these arisen in the form that they have at the time that they have thinking about the scriptural witness not just in terms of um the questions that animate complementarians or egalitarians but the scriptural witness on its own terms if we attend to the biblical text what might we learn what new questions what might we be asking thinking about issues of biology thinking about issues of sociology and all these other areas which have often had limited play within christian debates about um the sexes and so largely my work is designed to almost step back from that focus and to restore something of the peripheral vision and the frame within which we think about these things also to step back a bit from the framing that is provided by the conflict and the ideological conflicts themselves so often when we're approaching these subjects it's framed in terms of our theological and ecclesial struggles over different camps complementarian egalitarian and what people may be hoping for is a book in which

i present the complementarian position that this is the definitive account of the complementarian position that's not quite what i'm attempting to do although i am a convinced complementarian what i'm trying to do is to approach the bible and the world on their own terms and attentively to give an account of their realities and to engage with those in a way that is not primarily concerned with winning some argument that we have against some other camp but teaching us to be more attentive to the world and to have a way of thinking and speaking about what it means to be male and female within that world in a richer fuller and more apt manner and so that has always been my project and that is something that began several years ago in the form of this particular book and it is something that has not been abandoned but has been put very much on the back burner for the last while i'm hoping to um revisit it and um to actually finish it within the next few years so i'd appreciate prayer on that front but it's a long-term project in part because there is so much that has to come to bear on these questions and partly because when you follow the debates that people have had about complementarianism and egalitarianism they've been so narrowly fixated that a lot of the biblical and the natural and other data that we have within the world the things that should come to bear upon those questions have just been filtered out because they don't answer to the sort of questions that we have so when we're reading the scripture for instance very little is said about books like leviticus that have quite a lot to say about male and female in their own ways but in ways that don't actually fit our questions very well same with song of songs or some of the wisdom literature or we might think about the narratives of scripture that have extensive um gender patterns that again we tend to miss because it's not where we are looking for answers to our questions i appreciated the way you spoke about stepping back i think when you talk about a fixation with particular verses or particular words in the bible it's almost like there's something assumed underneath it like um that you're actually not trying to make it a narrowly theological project but you're talking about how reality itself actually works and it seems like you're trying to uncover that kind of architecture underneath the way that we actually live in the way that we actually operate as as human beings as as men and women yeah so i think that's one of the problems that we do have with the debates about complementarianism and egalitarianism they're both isms and there's a sense of an ideology at play which can be complicating when you actually attend the way that people live and to reality itself you see these patterns that are very clearly gendered and there are recognitions of there is a recognition of gender difference difference but without a very strong sense of roles in many people that these are just the natural grain of reality that people are working with and so when we talk about concepts like headship in scripture the point of scripture is not the man must be the head there is this complicated gender ideology that we must adhere to rather the statement is the man is the head it's not a matter of something that is a set of rules and roles that we need to live out primarily although there are ways in which we need to live in terms of that and we can live with the grain of that reality but often what we're trying to do is have an ideology that responds to some sense of lack or disorientation that we feel particularly within the modern condition and that i think is one of the reasons why there's been a lot of demand for um theologies of sex and gender that really would not be demanded in quite the same way in the past the whole concern for extensive theologies of gender and um the sexes it's a more contemporary concern it's not something that has as quite as extensive a precedent as people might think and so we do see the tradition talking about sex talking about the sexes and gender at many different points but not in the quite the ways that we do or with quite the same amount riding upon it i think the debates that we have today are very much shaped by our desire for an ideological foundation within a society where we feel disoriented in various respects it does seem like what used to be intuitive in ages past has now had to become explained and uh made more explicit and with that being said i am curious though if you have because this is something that my co-host paul and i we go back and forth about uh on whether you can define masculinity in a way where you're saying something true of a man that cannot be equally said of a woman is there anything i can say beyond biology that would distinguish a man from a woman and it sounds so silly because it seems so intuitive and yet when you articulate it it's difficult and i think that that is part of our problem that and you see that particularly in debates um connected to trans issues what is a woman um first of all we need to consider the way that we are defining masculinity and femininity or um femininity or um male and female or man and woman there are different shades of meaning to those things so we can talk about maybe masculinity or those things that come um those traits that are more typical of men or we might think about a maleness as the biological state of um of men or we might think about manhood as a state that you have entered into as a mature man um think about man again

it's an adult form of the male um all of these are slightly shade shades of related meaning when we're thinking about um masculinity i think it's helpful to or when we're thinking about a man i think it's helpful to consider the way that that is defined defined not merely over against woman but over against boy um a man is someone who's mature in maleness

now there are ways in which that can be defined in juxtaposition to a woman but adam was a man before eve was created there's a sense in which our being a man or a woman is not just contingent upon um some other party over against which we define ourselves there is an element of that to it but that's not all it is i think the other thing is that we need to just when we're thinking about abstract definitions consider primarily that um being a man or a woman is about a particular installation into life it's a way of being situated within human existence that is differentiated and so there are possibilities and realities that are open to men that are not open to women and that's not just a bare fact of biology it's something that has implications for every single part of our existence and this is a helpful thing a concept and the sexuate condition so we talk about sex and sexuality and those can be more narrowly focused upon um our biological state or upon um sexual relations where there are reproductive relations or um intimate um genital relations between the sexes but when we're thinking about the sexual condition it's getting at something of the way that as men and women we are men and women all of the time so i'm doing everything that i do as a man and a woman is doing everything that she does as a woman it's a fact that's behind everything and so if i act in a particular way it matters that i'm doing so as a man likewise there are ways in which for instance a father figure can do exactly the same actions as a mother figure and yet they resonate very very differently and so it's like describing perhaps the difference between a note played by a violin and a note played by a piano it's the same note it's they can be playing off the same um piece of musical script they can be playing as part of the same performance but there's something about the quality of that note that is different because it's played by a different instrument now i think that can feel like the challenge of defining what a man or a woman or masculine and feminine actually are because we're trying to get at something that we can think about all the different commonalities that there are and we can think about all the ways in which we can do exactly the same things but that quality of difference is difficult to describe and demarcate we know what it is on some level we have a sense of it it's like smelling a perfume and you can't necessarily point out where the perfume stops and starts and exactly its contours but we're very clearly aware of its presence now when we're talking about male and female there is something of that character to it it's also important to think about the ways in which we look for certain types of definitions and so we might think about a universal definition that applies to each and every member of the male class or the female class that applies only to those members of the male class only to members of the the female class and those sorts of definitions are limited in part for instance because male and female is a fact about two genres or genders of humanity and those genders are not just um identical human beings there's something distinctively masculine about certain sorts of men um that is seen in particular traits that many of us men don't have and then certain traits that we have that are maybe distinctively masculine that other men don't have and so those sorts of characteristics which are more like family resemblances than hard and fast definitions um can often get filtered out when we are looking for those hard and fast definitions we might also think about the ways in which um many of the things that are male or female are culturally conditioned um there are ways in which being a man in some societies involves very different things from what involves in others and yet go from society to society and you can see a logic to it there's something fitting about the cultural um expectations for male and female and you can go to all these societies and you're not going to be at risk of mixing up the two sexes you can recognize every single society divides men and women in with different cultural norms but every single society has that division and every single society you'll find men and women are recognizable and if they were mixed up behind your back and you arrived in that society you would know that something was awry this is something anthony eselin points out that i think is just a very helpful point it's a sort of injection of common sense into a conversation is often lacking it because we're thinking at such abstract definitional levels and many of the differences between the sexes again i think arise out of very concrete conditions and the ways in which we are installed into them so for instance the fact that um women have bare children it's something that comes with all sorts of implications and it's just a very significant reality or the fact that men have greater strength on average this is maybe something that's not true for each and every individual man but as a group it makes a big difference on the society-wide level so for instance if we're thinking about those sorts of differences on average we might think about the way

which there are being members of our own sex and the ways in which there are differences in the ways that we relate to each other and we relate to our own sex and all of those things i think are best provided when we step back avoid the um very narrow demands i think of hard and fast definitions recognize for instance the existence of family resemblances um those sorts of definitions that there are things that are true of a group that are not necessarily true of each and every individual so we might talk about he has his um father's nose or he has the family ears um not every single member of the family has to have the family ears but there will be some members of it that will have distinctive features and taken together you'll be able to recognize members of a family often even though they have very different features and it's the overlapping or um similar features that mark people out and when we think about the sexes it's a similar sort of thing when you're trying to define men and women you're often trying to define them relative to certain criteria that can take different forms so for instance are men more courageous than women well courage looks different in men than from women in typical situations and so there are ways in which there are plenty of overlaps but there are also differences and then we can think about the ways in which there are a lot of different traits in which the sexes both have those traits but those traits um occur with different weightings with different sorts of relations and there's a sort of differing constellation of um virtues for each of the sexes those virtues can be the same virtues but some appear with a different sort of blight brightness or color than they do in the other and so i think thinking about the way that we are looking for a definition is a good place to begin um because often we are looking for the sort of definition that will necessarily narrow our field of inquiry limit the degree to which we're seeing the phenomenon that we're trying to perceive and leave us dissatisfied with our purchase upon something it's very really there we feel it but we can't yet put our finger upon it well when you speak about the family analogy i think it's a helpful analogy you don't want to have a sort of an essentialist definition that is going to screen out people who don't share every single trait of manliness but there's enough of a similarity that you know it when you see it what is it that alerts us in the same way that we know it when we see it what is it that alerts us we know it when it's not there when it's when it's the opposite of what it ought to be what what would be the grounds for saying something is effeminate there is a way to be a man and yet not be manly and what is that what is that thing yes i think that's one of we've got on the one hand the danger of having overly narrow definitions on the other hand definitions part of their point is to bound a particular group or define it and not necessarily with absolute boundaries but with clear enough that we know the object of our inquiry we know to some extent when something falls outside of that category and so first of all we need to consider the fact that there is a difference between being male and being a man or being manly or being masculine all of those things are slightly different and so being male is just that

biological state being a man is being an adult version of the male and if we're talking about being manly it's being marked in those characteristics that are more typical or noteworthy among men and being masculine um is something similar but it's um when we're talking about manly it's a more cultivated generally um form of masculinity so there are many people who are masculine um but those masculine traits can be a bit wayward or and they can be uncultivated or they can be um in vicious forms rather than virtuous ones so often when we're talking about manliness we're talking about something more virtuous than just raw masculinity and when we think about masculinity we generally think about those things that are more um distinctive of of of men and not those things that men share in common with women um which can be no less proper for men to have um and this is an important thing to recognize being a man is not necessarily being as different from women or over against women as possible um many of the things that a mature man should exhibit are things that he will learn from women and things that will make him more able to do things in women around women and with women and be in women's company without being a problem and so we can think about the ways that many um testosterone fueled young men are not able to operate with wisdom and grace and self-control in ways that would enable them to act well with women whereas the mature man the manly person is someone who has mastered their traits and is able to be someone for instance who's gentle with children and that's not necessarily a message a lesson that he's going to learn from the masculinity gurus on youtube is probably something he's going to learn from various women in his life and that's part of what becoming a mature man means but yet on the other hand as you say there are forms of effeminacy ways in which men fall short of attaining to those things that are good and properly characteristic of a mature form of male nature we can think about this in the way that we might think about a tree that has been stunted by the elements or by

poor soil and that tree is nonetheless it's still a tree it's still a particular instance of its species but there's something clearly that's wrong with it and there's something about it that has been stifled or stunted or prevented from rising to its full stature and we can see that in various cases where men are not given and this is where i think it's often helpful to describe the conditions under which men can become effeminate or fail to grow into a full masculinity and often it's when they are in situations that are not conducive to their full growth in male sociality and in ways that would form them into a healthy inhabitation of that so i think particularly the ways in which men need father figures in their lives or they need a context where they have a brotherhood or they need a context where there is a sort of intergenerational male community that forming young men into doing things that enable them to find strength of agency dignity of agency to practice courage and these sorts of things that are traits that are not necessarily exclusive to men they certainly aren't exclusive to men but they have something of a necessity for men that they don't necessarily have for women a man who's cowardly is his manhood his masculinity is thrown into doubt in a way that a woman that is not brave her femininity is not thrown into doubt in the same way and so there are different traits that are of more just are more distinctive or necessary to or more more central to or focal within masculine to your femininity and when we're thinking about effeminacy um again another thing to bear in mind is that our definition of this can often be a narrow one um certainly compared to the tradition which would include many things that we would not think of as a feminist at all many men who for instance are constantly going to the gym and building up their muscles and um very much focusing upon um building a macho image according to the tradition many of them are involved in a sort of effeminacy um they're fixated upon um their image they're fixated upon or they may be given to particular pleasures and much of our idea of masculinity when it's formed around consumption can be characterized by what the tradition might have seen as a sort of effeminacy so there's a danger of having a sense of masculinity and giving off strong macho vibes as the as the measure um the tradition will often have a far more expansive and subtle understanding of what it is that is truly masculine and what is falling short of that and so in the same way for for women often what we think of as more feminine can be falling short of what a woman should be um a lot of femininity in our society the vision of it is a sort of overly precious um a cutesified thing whatever and that's not really the vision of um femininity that we have within scripture the women of scripture are often far tougher and resourceful and they have a certain sort of agency and cunning and ability and they're not necessarily um fixated upon appearance or cutesiness and yet our cultural vision of that where we're trying to lean into a sort of performative hyper femininity um for women um can be a falling short of that and so i think often what one of our problems is because we've lost a sense of the constitutive reality of being male or female we have to have it as a performative reality and so we have to perform as much as possible what it means to be a man or be a woman and we end up becoming sorts of caricatures or stereotypes that that really um we miss part of the range and the repertoire that a true man woman should have so a true man should be able to be gentle and peaceable should be able to be um artistic think about a character like david david is a a warrior but he's also a musician he's someone who writes heartfelt poetry he's someone who is a man who's passionate and he's a lover he's someone who is a leader of men but he's also someone who can spend um who can win the hearts of women now when we're thinking about the modern vision of masculinity when you're trying to perform a macho identity you can often lose aspects like that on the other hand if we're trying to have the sort of new man the sort of feminist male they lose other aspects of it and there's a stuntedness and a loss of the repertoire that a true man should have when the man is just playing out the tame norms of modern society um we need to be self-mastered but that doesn't necessarily mean we should be tame and um hyper domesticated um and so i think these are the sorts of questions that maybe highlight that if you want to get to a healthy understanding of masculinity this is not the best place to start from um our society has a lot of mixed up notions that i think lead christians in response and reaction to those to maybe fall into um overly prescriptive and performative models of what maleness and femaleness masculinity and femininity manhood and womanhood involve so when you talk about there is a performative masculinity that itself the tradition would call effeminate this kind of desiring this attention uh it's the same kind of thing that drives you know the the cutesy feminine woman who just wants attention it's it's the same kind of drive it's actually effeminate right that now what is it about you called the male feminist that kind of archetype the beta man whatever you want to call that what is it about that specifically that we go that's not a mere diverse expression of masculinity that is a lack of man what is the lack what are

they lacking without falling into the trap of saying well anyone who writes poetry or weeps which david did and he was a warrior too you can have both but there's something what is off about that quote-unquote male feminist that we would classify as effeminate yes maybe taking a step back from this and thinking um the earlier statement i made about the man being described in scripture as the head um that that is just a fact of reality as scripture presents it not just something that is a prescription or uh um something that we need to have as a set of rules and roles i think that can be a helpful place to start so when we see masculinity functioning as it ought to there's a sense in which the man sets the terms uh sets the tone and sets the pattern and there is a way in which that is lacking in the man who's just um the um the man who's just oriented to the woman in his life and that's all he's oriented to um in scripture what we see is the man is created and given a mission and then the woman is created to be a helper suitable to him a true counterpart someone who can be uh counterbalanced to him someone who can be as it were the eye next to his eyes so that they can see in perspective together or the hand alongside his hand that they can grapple with the world together and have dexterity and ability to manipulate reality because they are working together now when we're thinking about that relationship that can go wrong in a number of different ways and one of the things that we see i think in the effeminate man that you described or the the sort of feminist model of the man that is not actually really appealing to many women is the fact that that's a man who's abdicated his headship it's not that the woman has become head um it's more that that space has just been vacated he's not doing what he should do and could do and what would render him a fuller man that doesn't mean that it's a status of um authority over the woman which is often how people misunderstand it i think that's not primarily what's going on rather there's a sense of the think about the relationship

[40 : 36] between christ and the church christ is the head of the church that doesn't primarily mean that he's the boss of the church rather it means he's the one that stands as the preeminent one in the church over the church leading it and representing it out into the world he is a mission he has power out into the world and the church is empowered by the fact that he has christ as his head as its head now we might think about that sort of headship as okay that's authority over and that weakens us um as the church that christ has authority over us and so we're in a position of being subjugated of being um lacking somehow authority has been taken from us because christ has this authority whereas that's quite opposite rather because christ has this authority we are authorized and empowered as his people and as his bride now in the same way the man as the head is one who has been given a mission a calling an agency within the world and power to impact upon the world that he should be leaning into it should be a mission out into the world that he leads the way in and the woman coming alongside him as a helper now when that's done well it can be very attractive for women and for men because the men see that this is you're making an impact upon the world you're exercising your agency and the women see that this is a man who's listening to my counsel and taking my advice who respects me as a true counterpart and helper and is using his strength not over me but in order to empower a common mission and so when we're thinking about the and often the vision of the feminist male it's a male that constantly has to step back to abdicate that sort of agency that he has the responsibility that comes with that to stunt his ability to exercise full agency in order to make space for women and one of the ways that that is really encouraged within modern society is when male and female spaces are just collapsed into each other and so men are often competitors with women and so if they exercise their agency it's squeezing women out and that's one of the problems that i think we do have is a difficult one to address because if men lean into that and into their strength they can end up undermining or downplaying or limiting women on the other hand if they step back they're not actually playing their full role as men and often they're leaving women unsupported so on the one hand you can feel if you're not leaning into that you're not actually being a full man and supporting the women that are dependent upon you on the other hand if you step back from that again there's something there's something wrong there so i think we need to be aware of the ways in which this can often be a response to social forms and realities that limit the scope within which we can live out our potential and our possibilities and i think here what we're recognizing when we see that something is wrong that there's a certain sort of ephemerous effeminacy that's bred in those sorts of men um their lives are without a clear self-oriented mission and so they're not actually working out into the world they're constantly trying to appease to um win over to pacify to whatever it is to please um the women in their life and as a result they just come across as weak and there's something

about that that is just not appealing to either sex um we recognize there's something wrong there and yet we also recognize that any healthy man needs to care about women and needs to seek to empower women and a man that's just trying to use his power over women to subjugate women he may be expressing a sort of masculinity but he's not being a good man and so that balance i think is a very difficult one within contemporary society well again why not just say that he's sitting that he is cowardly like wouldn't it be sinful for a woman to be cowardly and maybe a way to phrase a question would be are there things that are sinful for men to do that if a woman did them would not be sinful yes i think what we're dealing with here i think is not so much a situation where something is sinful for a man but not necessarily sinful for a woman um maybe inappropriate like yeah there are things that fit when we're talking about these sorts of things it's helpful to have broader categories like what is fitting yeah or appropriate for each sex um and often those things will vary from culture to culture because there are different cultural norms that are trying to express and concretize and expand the reality of what it means to be male and female and give some sort of etiquette and mode in which you can be a man or a woman and relate to the other sex in an appropriate manner now maybe to clarify i guess what i'm saying is if if uh if a man is being effeminate i don't think a woman could be effeminate it seems to be he's going against a fittingness to his gender that if a woman were to do it would not be going against a fittingness in her gender and i'm curious what that would be so you use example like cowardice would be sinful whether it's a man or a woman but i suppose if a man failed to defend his wife that would be an added level of effeminacy whereas if a woman failed to defend her husband i don't know that that would be seen as not fitting for her maybe that would be an example yeah so as i mentioned earlier there are ways that certain virtues function differently for each sex they have different sorts of expressions what it looks like for a man to be courageous is different from what it looks like for a woman to be courageous um men are not usually defended by their wives it's not usually a positive thing to be relying upon your wife to defend you um and that can often be a sign of weakness in a man if he just gets his wife to defend him or puts her out into the way of danger and we see examples of this in scripture they're not positive examples um on the other hand there are ways that women clearly manifest courage and we see several such examples in scripture too and those examples of courage can be things that are expected of them under certain circumstances for instance the ways that they defend their children um in various places in scripture that that is something that women should do um now when we're thinking about the differences between the sexes and the duties that are proper or the things that are more fitting to them um there are clearly differences i think when we're talking about um virtues and such as courage they do look very different a man is expected to defend his wife in a way that his wife will not be expected in quite the same way to defend him now there will be situations of course when a wife should be expected to defend her husband if her husband is suffering false charges or if her husband is being um slandered by some people within her community she can stick up for him and that's something that she should be expected to do and that's part of the problem that we're dealing with terms that have a wide semantic range courage defending things like that and we need to recognize that they are just different expressions of this and so the man who um sees his wife being attacked um physically um he needs to defend her physically and there's far more of an expectation there's an expectation there's an expectation of physical defense of his wife that there is not in the case of her of her husband to the same degree because of the differences in strength and the expectation that the man should be willing to give down lay down his life there's something about the life of women and children that should be protected from the violence of society and this is one of the reasons why traditionally societies for the most part did not send women out to war because women are supposed to be protected from that sort of violence young men and middle-aged men can go to war but older people the infirm women and children are protected from that sort of violence and so there's a sort of social norm that is gendered um that is based in part upon differences of strength but also based in part upon the recognition that men are by nature more suited for combat not just physically but temperamentally um and also in in other ways that there are um the fact that women bear children the fact that women are at the heart of society men and women function differently within the lives of their families so a mother is more likely to function as the heart of her home than the man we see this even in the ways that houses are organized if you look at homes are organized if you go into the typical home you'll find there's an implicit ordering of the space where the central rooms of the house belong to the woman um they're her realm and that doesn't mean that i mean they belong to the whole family but she is the

one who sets the terms for them she's the one who sets the tone for them she's the one who generally will determine the decor the person who will determine the ways in which people behave and don't behave within them and that generally applies over her husband too she will have requirements for um how things should be left and the man on the other hand will be more likely to have the rooms at the periphery of the house that are more focused upon agency and um certain forms of activity out into the world so the garage or the shed or the um the basement where he's maybe creating things or the um attic or the office those sorts of rooms are more likely to be the rooms in which he operates and that's just because men and women have different tendencies and we recognize also that there is something about women as a group and also individually that is central to society in the way that men are not societies the glue of societies and the internal heart of societies is really given by women primarily men may be the head but the woman is the heart and we can see the way this is on one level is a physical reality when a woman bears a child she's it's her body in which the unity of the couple is physically manifested and formed and when that child is born is born from her body that child um nurses upon her body her body is the uniting force but it's not just her body it's her whole presence within the world she is has an intimacy with her children and with her husband that mediates between all of them and so when a woman dies there's a sort of gaping hole left at the heart of a family that is different from the hole left when a father dies and both of those holes of immense holes but there is a difference between the two and so what we're trying to get at here is often um definitions not the best ways to get at them um but they are very real realities and i think we can feel them quite forcefully now in the case of the sort of effeminacy you're describing it's a world that has been so focused inward that there's no sort of outward action there's no sort of mission um and so it's a thoroughly domesticated realm where the man is just a sort of lapdog for the women in his life and um trying to be obliging and not inoffensive he's got no mission he's got no drive of his own there's no movement out into the world and we can sense there's something missing there and that there's something awry with that sort of man and likewise a woman that has no does not form a world around her does not create this realm of life um we recognize that there's something um that's missing there that if she's not trying to form some sort of community some sort of realm even if she has no children she can be forming that and i think there are different ways in which women do this there are different ways in which even when women and men are doing the same tasks the same activities ostensibly those can register differently and so for instance um often the ways that we talk about men and women doing the same career will reveal the different things that they are seeking to achieve through them and so the woman can often be seen as cultivating a life as a sort of artistic endeavor she's creating an identity um in a way that the man is not necessarily trying to do he's maybe trying to emphasize his agency um and those differences are not as hard and fast as the difference between trying to form a life and a realm around yourself and uh um to be seen and a sort of agency out into the world they're not as hard and fast as that women also want a sort of agency and men also want a certain sort of life but when we're thinking about these issues we need to recognize that they are always going to exceed our terms and often what we need are different ways of describing which often scripture gives us um and then we will they will start to sediment within our understanding and with a lot of different terms we will maybe be able to get a bit more of a handle upon them so i it seems like when you say that the bible talks about the male as head and i really do like this instrument analogy what makes the sound of a particular instrument it's what composes it that the wood the shape of it the the tension of the strings will produce a particular sound and so the strength the physical strength of a man the emotional different capacity or whatever is going to create a kind of sound out in the world that will be distinct from a woman and i so much of what's happening today is sort of re-education against nature that we we don't want to acknowledge the profound reality beneath the fact that men are physically stronger that women are the only one that are able to give birth and that puts them in a vulnerable state that these are not sort of biological happenings but these are fundamental insights into what manhood a woman is without being overly prescriptive and it is interesting how in the physical domain where the man has greater agency he's expected to use that to defend the physical life of his wife but in some instances the wife has a greater agency in the social sphere she has stronger social networks and it's there's an onus on her to protect the honor of her husband and it just depends on what domain each one is naturally bent towards that you can see it's the same virtue but the domains are different based upon earthy realities that emerge organically from who we are and i can see how i rules and roles primarily and that's the important thing that the difference between those

instruments is not primarily a set of rules and roles it's just emerging from the reality as you say and these things will as a result be operative even when people are ideologically resisting them and that's an important thing i think for us to recognize right so for instance think about how much of the feminist movement is about identifying the reality of patriarchy and patriarchy is a way of speaking about the dysfunctional and oppressive character of much male headship it's something that can be seen in all sorts of different areas of society societies around the world it's not something that seems to have a single historical root it seems to arise from natural realities um that go wrong and so when we're talking about patriarchy it's a way of speaking about dysfunctional headship but it's a fact of that has arisen from reality itself and this is something that can be when you actually think about it it's a testimony within people who are often resisting the sort of account that we're giving here um it's a way in which their own accounts witness the part of the reality that we're discussing and i think where also if we if we express ourselves carefully and interact we can find a lot of common ground with people that we might not assume we could and so for instance think away about the ways that feminist movements have tended to operate think about the ways that they have tended to conceive of power and the importance of the ways that they've sought power not primarily through forming power themselves but through petitioning others to act upon their on their behalf or seeking administration of power that has been given that has been established elsewhere now those are typically um more feminine modes of power they're real modes of power and they've also thought about social power and exercising these networks um social networks and so what we're seeing if we pay attention and rather than thinking about the ideological framing of the opposition just look at the material reality and the way that these movements operate and what they're pointing out within the world we can see that we actually have a lot of we're recognizing common realities even though we may describe them very differently and that i think can be helpful to defuse some of the anxiety that people have when they focus narrowly upon rules and roles and thus upon people who are resisting those um the natural realities will assert themselves even in those who are on the surface trying to resist them and so when we look through all these different movements we will see that likewise if you think about the way that um power will operate between within male and female groups it will play with the typical tendencies of men and women and when we see in our screens again and again women cast in more male roles [61 : 02] we recognize something's off we recognize the people wouldn't be responding to that woman as she walks into the room in the way that they are within this film we recognize there's something awry and there is something about the way that this person is acting that is not typically feminine and it's not just that um she is um resisting some ideology there's something about her that is not believable we know how feminists act they can resist the ideology but in practice they are acting in ways that are consistent often with their their sex and likewise men who even when they can resist all the expectations of society to be masculine there are things that are fairly typical that still emerge in their practice and so i think having a sense of confidence in nature's assertion even in those people that most resist it i think can be a helpful point within some of our gender debates it can make us more attentive to realities that we might otherwise ignore and it can give us a grounding for um those um duties obligations customs and other rules and roles whatever it is that we might want to build upon those um recognizing that those are not ultimately the foundation they build up from actual natural realities that are deep-rooted they aren't going to be um readily eradicated although they can be we can be disoriented in them it is funny when you see in media there's the trope i think you've actually written about this about you know i always joke in uh if you want to write a script about a strong action female character you always have a there's always a scene where a guy puts his hand on her and she says you know you touch me again you die you know something like that and what's odd is we're not odd but interesting is all of these leading action female heroes are all very feminine in their physique i mean they're all they don't look like an mma fighter you know and so there's this jointed where you're like you're telling me that this woman who is who who's still even in in her trying to defy feminine tropes is still a beautiful woman she's got the hair like all the trappings are there but now we are expected to believe she could knock a man through a wall and and you see the same tropes that the things that you'd expect within a society that recognizes these natural realities you don't see these women being really beaten up no you see male characters being really oh yeah yeah but you don't see this with the women and also there's a sort of performative um attack upon the man uh often as you mentioned don't touch me again this this sort of extreme touchiness right that they have to perform their strength in a way that the man doesn't right um and there's something about that that i mean i think of the expression

margaret thatcher if you have to say that you're powerful you aren't really powerful yeah something along those lines that there is a a sort of performative exaggerated um power the expression of power that just feels artificial now there are some places where this the type actually gets they pull it off fairly well it's fairly believable yeah but it's a fairly common trope and people recognize it by this point and it's fairly tired um partly also because these women can't be complicated characters because they're designed to be symbols of empowerment right and so they can't be flawed and failing which tend to be the most interesting characters right flaws they have limits they um are rounded and they're the strong female character just tends to be a very boring character because she's she's trying to make an ideological point

in an unnatural way that does not actually resonate with how many people how many women will actually experience the world she's a performance of an ideological performance of strength that just does not ring true and there is something there that is exhibiting a failure of imagination about how women actually do exhibit strength and courage this is one of the things i think that you see in scripture again and again there are women exhibiting courage and influencing the course of history in ways that are not recognized within our society now think about the story of scripture and the way in which the key junctures are often junctures in which women are giving birth and showing courage resisting tyrants and other things like that so think about the struggle that you have in the story of um the patriarch's wives trying to give birth and the um struggle in pregnancy it's this theme within the story of sarai and the story of rebecca and the story of rachel and Leah the rivalry between the two women and the need to arrive at forgiveness and these things we might think of those as trivial domestic dramas but within scripture they are not seen as trivial domestic dramas the whole fate of god's people hangs upon the way that these women face their situations same with the heroism of the hebrew midwives or amma of or jochebed and miriam or um even pharaoh's daughter in that situation or the story of hannah and the wrestling that she has in seeking a child samuel now as we go through the story of scripture these are recurring themes and they present women as strong agents and characters that are determining in their own way the course of history but in ways that really do not conform to our limited concept of what heroism looks like which is built upon a male mode and we're trying to fit and force women into that and so you don't get the story of ruth um within a modern framework of what the strong female character looks like but ruth is a strong female character right and you even you're talking about you know you talk about the the the critical points center around birth you think you're saying you know like hannah sarah uh these women you know rachel craving you know a child and and sometimes i think we domesticate and we think they just really want to have a cute kid but i think they're believing the promise to eve that she'd be the mother of the living they are they are in in times of remarkable uh darkness they are these bright lights of saying that to to honor the call of motherhood is to remember and to appropriate the promise that god gave that redemption will come through eve through these through this line of mothers and but also you see that within characters like sarah she knows that this is the covenant child the child of promise or um rebecca's recognition two nations within her womb this is this is profound these are profound things at stake well think about the story of hannah and in her prayer the way that she expresses that this is um portentous for the turning of the tables of the nation um likewise in mary's magnificat all of these women recognize in their struggles that the fate of kingdoms the fate of peoples are at stake and that what they do and the ways that they have private dramas that may not be seen on the national stage is no less significant for the destiny of the nation than um the actions of soldiers going out to war now think about the thousands of men that we read of dying in battle

in the scriptures just as part of a number and think about the women that we read about struggling in birth um which ones are recorded for us um for the most part there are examples of men who go out to battle but there is so much focus upon these women um struggling in birth that i think it is uh it should chasten our sense of priority and also just more socially our sense of priority because often it's very easy to say we should value more women um in the life of the family and the home while leaving the home as this marginal realm on the side of society and investing all of our interest and activity and agency in pursuits that lead us away from that um rather than actually centering it and giving it the dignity and women within that realm the dignity that they should have and likewise recognizing the home should be central for men yeah yeah it very used to be and it used to be it did and and what often what we have is men who have abandoned that they've been devoting their agency elsewhere um suddenly that realm becomes very weak and pitiful and it doesn't really offer

much empowerment for women and men are supposed to be actually empowering women in various ways and enable them enabling them to expand in their work and when men are investing all of their energies and activities and strength elsewhere um women will naturally want to go to those other places and so what we failed to um when we failed to coordinate our labors there will be transformation of society and i think this is one of the things that we're seeing within modern society and it's a crisis on many different levels not least with falling birth rates because we just have not invested um within the life of households it always strikes me how oftentimes in these modern evangelical sort of gender debates many egalitarian you know will say you know well look at deborah and i think it was jael who you know stuck the tent pole into the tyrant's head and and they highlight these women who were acting in these traditionally masculine war-like roles and it's interesting how when we think about elevating women we think about the women who do these you know are war heroes or you know killing people and uh although it's worth thinking about the ways that characters like deborah and jael can give us a fuller understanding of what it means for women to um be um exercising that motherhood for instance because deborah presents herself not primarily as a war hero but as a mother she's a mother in israel seeking to raise sons and the problem that israel has is it's under the dominion of this foreign power and it really does not have agency it's being crushed and so within many of those societies you just have the clamping down upon the men the men don't have agency because the men are crushed in various ways or they're killed or they're um enslaved and so the society becomes more feminized and that is not presented as a good thing in scripture right deborah is not happy that she can actually exercise her female power over the men and this isn't a an image of a progressive positive she's trying to re-establish something yeah yes it's an image of a society that has gone wrong right and what she wants ideally is men like barak and others to step up and to actually be able to defend israel so that she can actually fully and other women within israel can actually fully express themselves and be free to be mothers and to be exercising a significant social role which a true motherhood should involve i mean if we think about the images that we see in places like proverbs 31 this is not just a woman who's consigned to a domestic realm that is marginalized from society she exercises a fairly central role within society with influence and with weight and dignity and that's one of the things that we've often lost within our societies which makes it difficult for us to have these debates well because we're arguing often it seems for women to restrict themselves to a realm that cuts off most of the things that they should be doing most of the things they've been gifted to do and the whole debate about should women remain at home is just misconstrued because most of the things that women should be doing are in the workplace um but the workplace is in the wrong place that's part of the problem that our society has been so divorced from its central engine and realm of life that we end up with a situation where women are torn between things that they should not be torn it's fat i remember somebody wrote about how if you saw someone's resume that said they're a part-time nurse educator administrator uh you know uh entrepreneur care a social worker psychologist counselor you'd think that they should be paid millions of dollars and yet mothers are doing all of those things when it comes to raising children and it used to be that that these male female realities were born out of necessity the man led the home because he's the only one who can move the plow the woman was at home because she was the one who uh had the ability to bear children and to nurture them in their early ages um with industrialization with modernization with technology those days are over though at least they're not going to be the mainstream of life i don't think anytime soon so where do we go from here how do we recapture i mean what does that tangibly mean if you're talking to a young couple and saying you're the head all right and you're the helper what does that mean monday through friday i mean we can't get overly prescriptive but what are some directions that we could push people in the modern world to recapture a sense of of maybe what was lost because i like i like the fact that infant mortality uh is down and that we have advil you know and that you're not going to die of a blood clot and stuff like that so i don't want to overly romanticize the past but where do we go how do we recapture the home as a place of creation and male authority in the home as a leading out into the world well first of all i don't think it's helpful to think about this as a fundamentally conservative vision um i don't think our goal should be to try and recapture some state in the past um i don't think that there was some ideal um desirable state in the past in many ways when you look back you can see deep dysfunctionality there are ways in which certain aspects of maleness and femaleness could be more um visible or more prominent in the past in certain aspects but there are many ways in which men and women were constrained um by certain necessities that weren't good certain necessities

of course help them and nudge them towards um playing out certain key realities of our nature but many other of those necessities actually stunted them and so when you're thinking about um a society that where

there's constantly war and other things like that think about the song of Deborah Deborah talking about the situation where um Cicero's mother is expecting him to come back and he's expecting that there's she's expecting that there's a womb for each one of the um the warriors they're just going around raping the women and that's the sort of society that um many people have lived in in the past a society of widespread violence and rape and pillage and you don't thrive within that society either as a man or a woman there are certain men who may rise as warriors but many men will just be prematurely killed and their wives be left as widows and their children orphans and there'll be many men who will be raised without father figures or men who will suffer the loss of um their children in in um through illness and other factors so we should not romanticize the past what scripture presents us with is i think a vision of how things ought to be and that is something from which we looking at the past can take learn certain lessons we can learn certain things about our own society recognizing its contingencies historically and otherwise but we need to think primarily in terms of the goods that we want to work towards and so every single society has to make some sort of um settlement between the sexes it's an imaginative process and in some ways there's a progressive element here we need to think about there's not so much as a state to be preserved or to be retrieved but as something to be worked towards it's a sort of dance that we need to construct that's not yet happening it's happening intermittently and inconsistently but there are ways in which we need to coordinate into a more full dance under the conditions that we have in our society now those conditions are modern industrial industrialized and post-industrial society and there's conditions that require a lot of imagination and creativity and that's how i think we need to approach these questions more we need to recognize the grain of our reality that it is still operative even if we don't think it is you can go on the internet and you will see maleness and femaleness in operation everywhere right maleness and femaleness have not gone away even when we're just virtual persons interacting in virtual space we still interact very much as male and female the dynamics of male and female sociality can be seen in social media very profoundly um and then we can also think about the ways in which those dynamics shape modern institutions the expectations that we have and the ways that for instance educational institutions operate the norms that um govern modern society have become feminized in particular ways and places in other places women have been masculinized and there are ways in which each sex and both sexes have been stunted by a society that is really stifling them within their conditions so where i would argue we need to go is towards an imaginative vision that takes into consideration the concrete material conditions of modern life assesses those um assesses those as creative tools and also as um conditions that in many respects are not good ones and we need to be

[81 : 20] people who don't just take our technologies as a given but treat them as um things that equip us to create new things or um maybe limit us in certain respects we need to develop a creative vision that brings together the sexes in a way that enables both to achieve their own thriving and thriving and they're thriving together and that i think is something that requires far more than just turning back the past it requires deep attention to our social realities deep attention to where those things have gone wrong deep attention to the possibilities that they present us with those places where they must just be resisted and they are not good to pursue and then to in that sort of way um move forward and to create something that does not already exist i do not think that we have experienced a society yet which is one in which men and women can truly thrive as the Lord intends us to that is something that we need to creatively and imaginatively work to move towards you're helping us i think get out of gridlock here going back to some Friedman stuff the the imaginative gridlock when ideologies kind of clash go ahead go ahead i'd like me to cut you off yes and on that front i think a lot of it will involve and breaking what he talks about the sort of anxiety that drives our projects and so the anxiety that drives our projects is the sense of the limited options that we are immediately presented with within modern society and so for instance we're presented with the stay-at-home mother or the mother or the woman who's going out to the workplace now what if we broke with the sense that those are the options and imagined other ways of facing um of constructing our social reality ways that actually did not divorce um women from their agency in order to um be at the center of life and family nor to um divorce them from their family to enjoy agency and influence and dignity within society and neither of those options is a good option and so i think there's a lot of room when we actually step back from the anxiety that drives us the sense

that we need to choose one of these options that um we need to accept all of these dilemmas um and start to think more creatively to recognize the conditions of reality that all of us are working with whether we like it or not whether we recognize it or not and then to think about the ways that scripture presents us with the good in some narratives in the ways that it presents the creation situation and the ways that presents the redemptive situation of christ and the church the ways that in things like the song of songs it presents a deep unity of male and female and they're joining together in a loving um relationship where each is greater for the presence of the other um those are the sorts of things that i think we need to look towards and that will involve a certain break from the anxiety of the questions that may have initially um propelled our inquiry stepping back from those and actually trying to look at reality trying to look at the scripture and through both of those things getting a sense of possibilities and other things to pursue which will always be partial intermittent and limited we're never going to achieve some utopia within our lifetimes or some immediate um overcoming of all the social constraints that we experience

but we can definitely take significant movements in the right direction and ways in which we can both rise to a greater level male and female to a greater level of um appreciation of our own place within the world and an appreciation of the others and of the possibilities that open out to us when we work together as we can i think about how even this discussion i'm asking about definitions and and what does this mean and uh i i kind of wonder if it's even in the way that we i would imagine people right now people learn and are educated by reading a textbook or listening to a lecture where traditionally you apprentice somebody and so it's difference between learning about woodworking as a carpenter from a book versus apprenticing with somebody and watching them work with wood and tools every day and i'm sure if you asked a carpenter you know what is the definition of a carpenter he would sort of just look at you and say i don't really know but he would show you the the fruit of his labor he would show you a way of life that he embodies and that would be more in uh more informative for you than if he were to simply explain something and and maybe that's where the anxiety comes from because we don't know if we're actually doing what we should because even the mode of how we determine that is is sort of disembodied from organic actual real people around us being an example and organic reality if you one of the illustrations that i've given in thinking about modern society and the way that it thinks about the sexes the way that it thinks about um what it means to be a man or a woman and and just our interactions it's like uh um an astronaut in space that is they're operating in microgravity they um experience several dawns in a single day there's a sense of um disorientation they don't know exactly which way is up and down um and in all of these different ways their body was not designed for that sort of context they experienced the um wasting of certain muscles or they experience nausea they experience a sense of disorientation and um have struggle having a healthy sleep pattern all of these things are a result of some disconnect between the body and its natural embeddedness within the world the world of the actual planet that we're situated upon and in the same way if we want to know what it means to be man and woman you need to lean into the organic realities that we're supposed to be leaning into and so if you don't have strong male or female societies that you're participating in if you don't um raising families if you're not um engaging in contexts of intergenerational community of the sexes if you're not learning how to relate to the other sex as a member of a sex over against them of course you're going to have struggle to understand what maleness or femaleness is you'll end up wanting definitions and rules and roles for things that should come a bit more organically as you actually participate in reality and so if you want to think about what it means to be male or female often the most important thing is to lean into um those things that elicit um the virtues of maleness and femaleness you become a full man as you engage in concrete labor within the world with other men you become more of a man as you learn how to relate intergenerationally as a son to a father and as a father to a son you will learn to be a man as you learn to be among brothers to struggle to have a common project or mission you learn how to be a man as you learn how to relate to women as one who is not a woman but who can treat women with understanding and with dignity and with gentleness you learn how to be a man as you form a household as you um create a realm about yourself that you're um maintaining and upholding the boundaries and the foundation and setting the tone for all of those things it will elicit your masculinity and what many people are doing i think is trying when they've lost all of that organic stuff that's actually eliciting what it means to be a man or a woman they're trying to form that artificially and so it's like the situation where you're not actually developing muscles through actually

working in the world through moving around um the um working with animals through moving around a plow or whatever as we spoke about earlier or walking in the fields or working in the forest chopping things down you're not building muscles that way so you have to use machinery and artificial things as a means to develop something that would organically have developed without you actually actually focusing upon it and now we've increasingly become focused upon masculinity and femininity in themselves as appearances and performances that tend to be uprooted from the actual organic realities that they were designed to serve and so i think the primary way i would encourage people to get um a grip on a biblical understanding of these things is to get back in touch with the organic realities that these are designed to serve they will elicit and strengthen and provide the soil within which a healthy masculinity or femininity will grow and it's in the neglect of those that we'll often find ourselves disoriented and grasping for these things that are not necessarily the most helpful well said that was very helpful alistair i appreciate this conversation this was uh i appreciate the thoughts you put into it and uh if this is any glimpse or foretaste of uh airs together uh we should be it should be a good a good and helpful work and uh you know maybe the next 20 40 years whenever that book comes out hopefully uh hopefully that this will be something that could be more widespread i do think you've done a lot of great thinking about this and this has certainly challenged me and helped me think through a lot of these categories and i appreciate uh your dedication to this and your thought and for for joining us uh for this interview thank you thank you you