

Breaking Open:

Genesis 1

*The Gender of
God & Creation*

Soulforce





Soulforce provides expertise on Christian Supremacy to further the movement toward collective liberation. We work to end the political and religious oppression of transgender, intersex, queer, bisexual, lesbian, and gay people through relentless, nonviolent resistance.

Learn more about our social justice work at www.Soulforce.org.

The *Breaking Open Series* is a compilation of short resources created to provide guidance on challenging scriptural passages and interpretations most often used in ways that harm LGBTQI people and other marginalized communities. Through discussion questions and accessible language, each resource is designed to support you and your communities in building a justice-centered relationship to faith and religion, founded on principles of promoting life abundant for all people.

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Breaking Open:
Genesis I

The Gender of God & Creation

A liberating approach to the Bible that transforms
scriptural weapons into sources of power.



Introduction.

Many people believe that the Creation accounts in Genesis are historically accurate facts. Others interpret them as ancient myths used to explain how the world came to be as it is now. The reality is that none of us know for certain, since we weren't present at the beginning of time. But regardless of what you believe about the accuracy of the Genesis accounts, what is undeniable is that the Bible has been used as a justification for gender-based violence against women, Intersex people, and Trans people (among others).

This is of urgent concern to the LGBTQI community all around the world, and learning to interpret Scripture in ways that align with our ethics is an important way in which we can intervene to stop spiritual and physical violence that comes from weaponized religion.

The stories of creation in Genesis – the Biblical moment where human gender and sex are first created – have been misinterpreted with a male bias for so long that most people believe that there is only one possible way to read the text: as a narrative that invents a rigid gender binary, the superiority of men over women, the creation of mandatory heterosexuality for all people, and the supremacy of a male god. Thankfully, that is NOT the only way to understand the text! And the time to discover different storylines with more liberatory messages is way past due!

One thing I appreciate about LGBTQI people and our communities is that, I believe we reveal the splendor and abundance of an extravagantly creative God, not just in the diversity of colors and shapes of our bodies and their gender expressions, but in the wildly beautiful and creative expressions of love and family we create in the world.



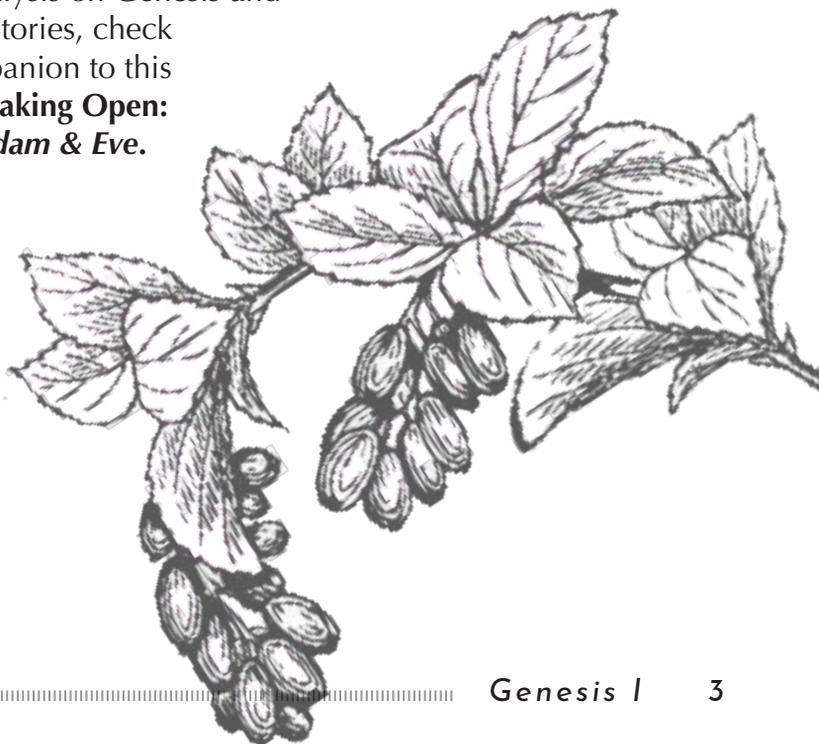
In this same tradition of our people, it is our hope that through this resource we can break open the text together by offering some new questions and fresh perspectives from leading Bible scholarship on more life-affirming interpretations of the Genesis creation stories.

Blessings on the journey,

Rev. Alba Onofrio

Rev. Alba Onofrio
Spiritual Strategist for Soulforce

p.s. This is only half the story! For more scriptural analysis on Genesis and the creation stories, check out our companion to this resource, **Breaking Open: Genesis 2, Adam & Eve.**



Key Concepts.

Sex is a legal category assigned to a person at birth based on visible genitalia, and less often based on a person's reproductive organs or chromosomes. Each person is almost exclusively labeled "male" or "female" despite the many natural variations in human biology. Gender is often thought of as the same thing as a person's biological sex, but this is incorrect.

Male-assigned means that one's parents, healthcare providers, and/or government determined your gender (masculine, man) based upon the sex you were assigned at birth (male).

Female-assigned means that one's parents, healthcare providers, and/or government determined your gender (feminine, woman) based upon the sex you were assigned at birth (female).

Intersex means being born with a set of characteristics that don't fit neatly into definitions of male or female. Experts estimate that up to 2% of people in the world are born with intersex traits.

Genital Mutilation Surgery refers to surgeries done on intersex children, without their consent, to make their genitals look more "male" or "female" in order to conform to culturally-specific gender expectations. This can also refer to surgeries done on non-intersex (dyadic) children due to specific religious or cultural customs.

Gender Binary is the belief that woman and man are the only genders that exist and that they are opposites of each other.





Gender is often confused with sex, but gender and sex are different. Gender is a socially created idea that certain physical traits, behaviors, gender roles, likes/dislikes, and even colors are associated with a certain sex. These associations change across time and location. In recent times, Western cultures have almost exclusively understood gender based in a male-female gender binary, but historically many indigenous societies have understood that there are more than two sexes and genders.

Gender Identity is a person's internal sense of self related to gender, specifically how someone perceives oneself.

Gender Expression is the way that a person expresses their gender identity to others—with their dress, hairstyle, speech, and body movements—based on cultural associations of sex and gender.

Gender Roles are expectations about how one will act as a part of a society based on their perceived sex and gender, including what jobs they perform, how they behave, and who they will be sexually attracted to.



Transgender or Trans people are people who identify with a different gender than the sex they were assigned at birth. People whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth are known as cisgender or cis.

Gender Transition is an ongoing process wherein a person transitions—internally, in community, at work, and/or with family—from one gender identity to another. This process may or may not include medical intervention or physical transformation, but often includes changes in gender pronouns and gender expression.

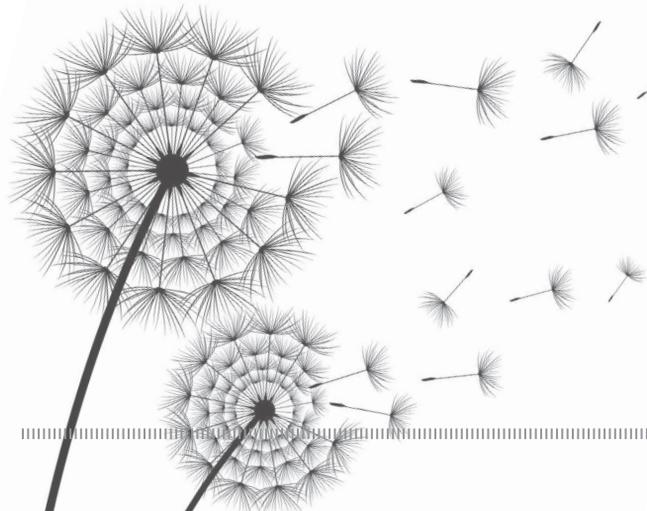
Gender Affirming Surgeries are medical interventions such as hair removal, chest reconstruction, facial surgery, and other forms of plastic surgery that support a Trans or Intersex person's gender transition. Not all Trans and Intersex people choose gender affirming surgeries, and not all Trans and Intersex people who would like to have medical services have access to them.

Transphobia describes prejudice, discrimination, hatred or violence against Transgender people.

Gender-Based Violence is any physical, emotional, psychological or sexual act of coercion, violence or the threat of violence—including access to resources—that is perpetuated against a person based on their gender and unequal power relationships.

Imago Dei is a Latin phrase meaning “the Image of the Divine,” which refers to a core teaching of Christianity that human beings are created in the image of God based in Genesis 1.

Merism is a figure of speech where the entirety of a category is represented by naming some of its parts or by naming the opposite ends. Genesis 1 uses merisms such as day & night, water & earth, male & female to represent entire categories of Creation instead of naming each and every element of Creation.



A Prayer in Preparation.

God of Creation, Beloved Creator of all things great and small, Your wonders are beyond measure! Your capacity for generating Life—in every color of the rainbow, in every conceivable shape and size and texture—is awe-inspiring. From the depths of the dark seas to the peaks of the mountaintops, the marvels of Your vast and miraculous Creation surround us. You, oh Giver of Life and Love, are beyond what our human minds can fully comprehend. We sing and dance prayers of gratitude and astonishment for all that you have revealed to us about Your nature through Your good Creation.

In this study of gender and the Bible, we humbly ask for You to gather with us. Please, help us shed wrong beliefs that cause harm and death, and help us to let go of anything that does not contribute to Your intention of full life for all of Creation.

Open our ears to hear Your Truth for our lives. Open our hearts to each other that we may become more mindful stewards of Your gifts and more faithful advocates for love and justice in our world.

Amen.



The Accusation.

Women are considered inferior to men because God is male and made Adam, the first human being, in his masculine image and gave him dominion over everything.

*God makes all human beings and animals with only one of two **sexes**: male or female. Everyone must align their **gender identity** and **gender expression** with their genitalia, for example men should have a masculine gender presentation and should have a penis and scrotum.*

Anyone who does not fit into that two-sex system is considered disordered and unnatural, and Intersex people should be made to fit into one box or the other the best they can.

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer people are also not living into God's plan for their gender, because they aren't exclusively partnering with people of the "opposite sex."

Trans people are not seen as "real men" or "real women," because God makes our genitalia in the womb, and that genitalia translates to one of two sexes with a matching gender, which are permanent and unchangeable. Trans women are perceived as trying to forgo their Divinely-given superiority as people assigned male at birth, and Trans men are perceived as trying to access more power than they are rightfully due as people assigned female at birth.

More broadly, anyone who does not comply with all the expectations of their assigned gender (man or woman) are viewed as choosing to live against God's natural order in Creation and should not be affirmed or supported in their gender identity or any gender transition process.



The Heart of the Matter.

According to Genesis 1, human beings are formed in the image of the Divine. But when the Divine is interpreted as an intimidating and coercive male deity, there leaves little room for gender equality and diversity. Similarly, when this creation story is falsely understood as the invention of a **gender binary**, it creates dangerous conditions and hostile environments for anyone who does not fit easily into the expected roles and gender expressions defined as male or female. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Queer people face violence and discrimination, because we do not comply with the gender expectation that we will be sexually attracted to and partner with someone who is perceived as “the opposite sex.”

Intersex people, who are up to 2% of all people in world, are often given invasive and unnecessary medical interventions as babies and young children to force their bodies to conform to the mythical gender binary. **Trans people**, because of their perceived noncompliance with “God’s natural order,” are subject to degradation and physical violence, even from within their close personal relationships.

Even men, who seem to have the most power within a hierarchical gender binary, are forced into **gender roles** and expectations that do not fit their most authentic selves. Boys and men are often inhibited from identifying and expressing a full range of emotions and connections with other people, because they are expected to control and possess others.

When we try to dominate each other or allow ourselves to be subjugated by others, we are not living into the Divine-likeness—also called the **Imago Dei**—from which we are all created.

When women and girls are not allowed to explore the full range of possibilities for their lives—including access to education, what kinds of work they do, what kind of romantic relationships they have, if they have children, and if so, when and how many children to have—they are denied the opportunity to fully use the gifts that God has given them.

And without gender equality, there can not truly exist a world in which all genders are fully honored and beloved as expressions of a wildly creative God.



Summary.

From Genesis 1:1 to Genesis 2:4a, we have the first creation story in which God speaks the universe into being in six days as follows:

- ☛ Day 1-God creates day and night.
- ☛ Day 2-God creates the sky.
- ☛ Day 3-God creates the dry land, the seas, and vegetation on the land.
- ☛ Day 4-God creates the sun and moon and stars.
- ☛ Day 5-God creates the creatures of the sea and the birds of the sky.
- ☛ Day 6-God creates land animals. Then God makes human beings in the image and likeness of the Creator and blesses them and gives them the responsibility for the care of Creation.

God finds everything that has been created to be good, and with Creation complete, God then rests on the seventh day.



“ The Text. ”

Genesis 1:1-2:4a (NRSV translation)

1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, **2** the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. **3** Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. **4** And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. **5** God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

6 And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” **7** So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. **8** God called the dome Sky. And there

was evening and there was morning, the second day.

9 And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. **10** God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. **11** Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. **12** The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. **13** And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

14 And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the

sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, 15 and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. 16 God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. 17 God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, 18 to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19 And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

20 And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." 21 So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it

was good. 22 God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." 23 And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

24 And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. 25 God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

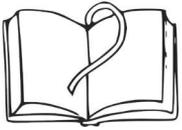
27 So God created human kind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." 29 God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.

31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

2 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. 2 And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

4 These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.



Analysis.

In this first of two creation accounts in Genesis (see **Breaking Open: Genesis 2-Adam & Eve** for the analysis of the second creation story), God fashions the world by speaking different facets of Creation into being. With each day, more elements of Creation come into being, and on the sixth day when God reviews all that had been created, God finds it all “very good.”

Of particular concern for this resource is whether or not women, Intersex people, Trans people, and LGBTQ people are included in this first model of God’s good Creation. First, we will explore the biblical concept of the *Imago Dei*, or “to be made in the image of God.” Then, we will take a deeper look at the text to identify God’s true gender. Lastly, we will try to understand our role in Creation as those who are made in the image of the Divine and given “dominion” over the earth.

Genesis 1:27 is written in a poetic style in which each line reinforces or further explains the line before. The first line says that *ha-adam* (אָדָם-הָאֵל) was created in the image of God, and the second line eloquently repeats the message to reinforce its significance. But the difficulty is that *ha-adam* can be translated multiple ways.

Most often it has been translated as “man,” which could mean a single male human (often assumed to be Adam) or all men. It is also translated as “man” as in “mankind,” meaning a generic term for all humans. In this case, translators have also used “humankind” or “human beings” in order to avoid confusion. But which is the most accurate?

The third line clarifies. The text is clear that God created BOTH female and male in the *Imago Dei*. The Scripture takes care to be specific and inclusive of women and girls when explaining who is created in the Divine likeness. It is also worth noticing that in this creation account, men and women were created at the same moment, and it appears that a whole group of humans was created rather than just one woman and one man.

In the next verse, God blesses all of humanity and gives them responsibility over the earth and all living things. Here there are no conditions placed on humankind in order to receive God's blessing: no requirements for performing certain gender roles, sexual orientations, family structures or wearing specific gender-assigned clothing or haircuts. God blesses unconditionally.

And just as God blesses all human beings, God also gives us all a significant responsibility for the health and wellbeing of God's precious Creation. Though the "dominion" in Genesis 1:26-28 has been interpreted as God's permission to human beings to exploit the earth, control its natural resources, and exterminate the creatures in it, this translation does not make sense in the narrative. The word that is used—*radah* (הָרַד)—also means "to take responsibility for something." It is preposterous to think that after spending six days fashioning every piece of Creation, blessing it, and finding it to be "very good" that God gave the beloved Creation to humankind to greedily pillage and use up for our own material gain.

Rather, God entrusted this cherished Creation to human beings. As the creatures formed in the *Imago Dei*, we have the most power of all the creatures to create and destroy. And as those who are made in the reflection of the Creator, we should also have the most respect for God's Creation and our duty to continue the sacred work of tending and caring for the earth and the treasured beings on it.

Just like Genesis is used to justify men's domination of women, Genesis has also been used to justify exploitation of the planet and its resources. Yet if we are to truly live into the *Imago Dei*, we should care for Creation in the same way the Creator has—with great care and blessing. And how much more then should we care for others who are equally made in the image of the Divine?

The one thing that God does not grant to humans, however, is dominion over each other. In this formulation, women and men are equal in receiving God's blessing, equal in power with each other, and equal in responsibility to Creation.

Genesis 1:27

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

The Christian belief that humankind is made in the image of God is core to our faith, and perhaps the primary reason for our conviction that every human has a right to dignity and full life by the very nature of being human and made in the *Imago Dei*.

But what about people who do not fit neatly into the categories of “male” or “female”? Are they also created in the *Imago Dei*?

The short answer is YES! Absolutely! But to answer with the biblical text, we need to understand a particular technique used in the poetic language of Genesis 1 called a **merism**. By using merisms, Genesis 1 can briefly reference a whole spectrum of things without having to name each one individually.

Can you imagine if every single element of Creation had to be named in Genesis 1 in order to be valid? What about amphibians or insects that aren't mentioned in the text?

A merism is a figure of speech where the entirety of a category is represented by naming some of its parts or by naming the opposite ends. For example, in American English, the phrase “searching high and low” for something doesn't mean one only searches the ceiling and the floor without looking anywhere else in the house. We understand that this merism means to search everywhere, the highest places and the lowest places and everywhere in between.

The Creation account in Genesis 1 uses a lot of merisms. The first example is in Genesis 1:3-5; God creates light, calling it “day,” and separates it from the darkness, called “night.” Though the text mentions only “day” and “night,” we know that it is referring to a whole cycle of light and dark. We never question whether dawn and dusk, sunrise and twilight are also created as part of a day simply because they aren't specifically mentioned in the Scripture.

Another example of a merism is Genesis 1:9-10 which reports that God made dry land and separated it from the water. No one denies the existence of in-between places like the swamps, marshes, mangroves, and shores where there is both land and sea together. We understand that they are just as “natural” and good as the named parts of Creation.

By the same logic, we can understand “male and female” in Genesis 1:27 as an inclusive merism. If “female” is considered the counterpart of “male”—indeed, often referred to as “the opposite sex”—then reading “male and female” as a merism expands the meaning of the text to include all sexes and all genders, including those who transition between the two, those who do not identify as exclusively male or exclusively female and all those who live between or beyond these two categories.

Many LGBTQI people understand gender as describing a spectrum of traits and expressions between masculinity at one end and femininity at the other. And we know that what is considered masculine or feminine at any given time is ever-changing. Each culture has their own set of characteristics that are assigned to men and women, and even those change over the generations. It is also important to recognize that there are many cultures around the world that have always had more than two categories for sex and gender.

If we recognize one’s **gender identity** as a collection of culturally-assigned physical attributes, likes/dislikes, and roles in family and society—rather than a fixed, never-changing identity based on our reproductive organs and sex-assignment at birth—then most of us will find within our most authentic selves a mixture of traits, some of which have been assigned to femininity and some to masculinity.



Through this interpretation, the language of Genesis 1:27 means that all people are created in the likeness of the Divine and blessed by the Creator unconditionally.

Now that we have established that all human beings are made in the *Imago Dei*, regardless of sex or gender identity, let us explore the issue of God's gender so that we can know the image in which we are all made.

Historically, God has been referred to by titles assigned to men like Father and Lord, but is God a man? Are all human beings made in the image of a male God?

The short answer is no, God is not exclusively male. From the very beginning of the Creation account, it is the feminine *ruach* (רוח), translated as the "breath," "wind," or "Spirit" of God, that does the creating in Genesis 1 as God calls the world into form.

And there is even more creativity in God's gender in the text! Just as Genesis 1:27-28 can be read expansively to include all genders within the image of the Divine, verse 26 tells us that God's gender is also expansive. Even though God is referred to as "he" throughout most of Genesis 1, a plural pronoun such as "they" might be a more appropriate fit. Let us turn to the text in Genesis 1:26 for even more insight.

"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...'"

The Hebrew word for "God" used throughout the creation narratives in Genesis is *Elohim* (מֵיְהוָה). *Elohim* actually means "gods;" it is the plural version of the singular noun *Eloah* (הוֹיָא). And the corresponding pronouns "us" and "our" used here in verse 26 are also plural. Does that mean that there is more than one God in this passage? Perhaps, but I do not believe so.

At the very least, using a plural name and pronouns for God in this passage opens up the possibility that God's gender is far more vast than the single identity of "male". And this makes sense, because God cannot possibly create something that is beyond Godself. So, if God created "male and female" and all the sexes and all the genders in between and beyond, then of course God's gender encompasses all of those and transcends human categories for gender.

In fact, *Elohim* is used more than 2,500 times in the Bible, making it a very significant reference point for the creative possibilities of God's many gender representations. For Intersex people, Trans people, and anyone who doesn't fit perfectly into the prescribed gender categories of either man or woman, an expansive understanding of God's gender is much more inclusive than the rigid gender binary system of male-female only. And even though the Bible often uses masculine pronouns for God, it also includes many references to God as female.

God > male.

In Scripture, God is also...

- a mother bear (Hosea 13:8)
- a birth-giver (Deuteronomy 32:18)
- a nursing mother (Isaiah 49:15)
- a laboring woman (Isaiah 42:14)
- a midwife (Psalms 22:9)
- a mistress (Psalms 123:2)
- and Jesus as a mother hen (Luke 13:34)

And lest we fall into the myth that everyone in the Bible fits neatly into the gender-binary system, it is important to reference eunuchs, a gender diverse group of people who play important roles in many Bible stories because they can move easily between male and female social spaces. There are also many, many examples of important biblical figures who defy their assigned gender roles such as Deborah, Jacob, Joseph, Ruth, the disciples of Christ, and Jesus just to name a few. (For more information about many of these biblical figures, check out the titles “*Feminism & the Evil of Eve*” and “*God & Gender Transgressors*” from our online video series, ***Breaking Open: Bible Self-Defense***).

A God that uses plural pronouns and creates humankind in that likeness paints an expansive picture of possibility for all of our different genders. It is a landscape of Creation big enough to hold the truest and most authentic selves we are each invited and challenged to live into each day by a wildly creative God.





Discussion Questions.

1. With an expansive understanding that gender has many forms and is not an either-or binary, can any emotional/love/sexual relationship be considered inappropriate or wrong?
2. How do you imagine God's gender? What pronouns do you typically use for God? After learning about the meaning of *Elohim* in Genesis 1, what do you think are the best pronouns to use for God and why?
3. How might seeing God's gender as expansive (not solely male) change the conversations in your community about gender equality?
4. Many theologians and Bible scholars understand Galatians 3:28 as a mandate for all people to be treated equally by removing the distinctions between human beings that cause unequal power relationships (like male-female, Jew-Gentile, slave-free). Is it necessary to classify people by gender rather than everyone as equal human beings? Why or why not?



5. What does being made in the *Imago Dei* mean to you?

6. Based on the concept of the *Imago Dei*, make a case for acceptance of intersex babies at birth rather than subjecting them to unnecessary medical procedures to force their bodies into the gender binary.

7. Does learning about merisms in the Creation story change the way you perceive Trans people, Intersex people, and all those who are in between and beyond the categories of man and woman?

8. How did you learn what was socially expected of you as either a **male-assigned** or **female-assigned** person?

9. What characteristics or likes/dislikes do you possess that are typically assigned to “the opposite sex”?

10. Do you think Jesus defied any gender role expectations as a young, unmarried, itinerant rabbi?



About the Editor.

Reverend Alba Onofrio is a Southern Appalachian First-Gen Latinx Queer Evangelical Femme, who lives and loves in community with QTPOC folks across the South in solidarity with those in the Global South.

Currently serving as the Spiritual Strategist for Soulforce, Alba focuses on spiritual healing & reclamation and subverting interlocking systems of domination by combating Christian Supremacy & spiritual violence.

They hold a Masters of Divinity degree from Vanderbilt Divinity School where their studies focused on the theologies of sex, embodiment, and ethics based in Queer desire. The call on their life is to eradicate shame and fear wherever they are found in order to make way for the New Creation that calls us all to live and love into our most authentic truths.

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