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SEEING RED: THE HANDMAID'S TALE, HUMAN DIGNITY, AND HOPE

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SYNOPSIS

Fans of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Hulu's television adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1985 dystopian novel, have taken to donning the red handmaids' attire to protest current cultural and political threats to reproductive freedom, specifically abortion rights. If those rights go, they surmise, then so will all of the progress feminism has achieved to this point, and America will soon resemble Atwood's imagined "Gilead," where women have no rights save for those granted by corrupt men in power. Those claiming that the television adaptation created by Bruce Miller is more documentary than fiction may be closer to the truth than they realize, but the similarities between Gilead and 2017 America do not stem from Christianity. Both worlds teeter on a functional view of human value, a system brought about in today's world in large part by secular feminism, the availability of abortion on demand, and the idolization of sexual freedom. Instead of Atwood's provocative prose depicting a caste system distinguished by colored clothing, however, today's "handmaid's tale" is told in terms of wealth, performance, and status, as well as in the language of artificial reproductive technologies that cross moral boundaries. As so-called progress continues, children continually are reduced to products — whether disposable or purchasable — and women (as well as men) steadily are being defined out of existence. We're not hurtling toward a dystopian Gilead; we're already there. Ultimately, neither story can be told without glimmerings of human dignity, particularly deep longings for identity and justice. True Christianity answers both worlds and tells a far better story.

While the current cultural and political climate has the nation seeing red, the phrase takes on new meaning with the blood-red attire worn by the handmaids in Hulu's

television adaptation of Canadian author Margaret Atwood's 1985 dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Atwood's story is set in New England, but what once was the United States has fallen in a violent coup by rabid fundamentalists who reorder society into strict castes. Renamed "Gilead," this spurious Puritan society seeks, in part, to save the human race. The birth rate has plummeted, thanks in large part to environmental toxins. Those forced to live outside of Gilead spend their days cleaning toxic wastes in "the colonies," their skin falling away — futuristic lepers cast out and deemed unclean.

Within, Gilead is a twisted theocratic dictatorship beneath a pseudo-Christian flag. Biblical passages and narratives are invoked, although Bibles remain locked in boxes on mantles, accessible to the key-carrying Commanders — the overzealous "Sons of Jacob" who rule society and their upper-class households.

Women in Gilead live in strict submission, unable to work, read, or roam where they wish. There is division by color — the Wives wear blue, the Marthas green. And at the bottom of the caste system are the handmaids. Their red, nunlike, neck-to-toe garb gives them a Hester Prynne–esque notoriety. Red, the color of seduction and bull's-eyes, serves as an everpresent reminder that the handmaids are both hated and revered for possessing an indispensable thing: fertile wombs.

Glorified slaves, the handmaids are breeding stock who have been torn from their former lives and forced to undergo indoctrination by the Aunts in a militarylike institution. They reside in the Commanders' households and exist solely to participate in monthly "ceremonies," during which the leaders appeal to the biblical narrative of Rachel, who, desperate for a child of her own but unable to conceive, sent her handmaid in to Jacob to conceive and bear a child for her. What follows is state-sanctioned rape, the handmaid situated between — both literally and figuratively — Commander and Wife, forced to serve as a surrogate.

Atwood, a supporter of abortion rights, imagined a world in which women lost the right to say if and when they would give birth and, consequently, her Gilead unraveled all of the progress feminists had made prior to the mid-'80s.

Though Hulu's pilot of this series was written and filmed prior to last year's election, it doesn't take a genius to realize the dumb luck of the show's timing. In a nation divided, Elizabeth Moss's Offred (literally "of Fred," her Commander's name) has become a symbol for abortion rights, with women donning red handmaid's habits and white bonnets at protests around the nation. The TV Gilead, created by Bruce Miller, is updated from Atwood's. It mentions Uber and ISIS and champions LGBTQ struggles in ways the book did not. The show won eight Emmys, and Atwood, in a recent interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, claimed that when the election happened, the show's cast decided, "We're no longer making fiction — we're making a documentary."¹

But does *The Handmaid's Tale* accurately depict our trajectory? Gilead may be close to reality, but not in the way its followers think it is. Both teeter on a faulty foundation of functional human value, systems that can't help but create worlds where some human beings matter more than others. Our version of Gilead doesn't stem from a

warped misrepresentation of Christianity but, in large part, from a combination of secular feminist thinking, abortion on demand, and the idolization of sexual freedom. In both stories, however, human dignity peeks through in the recognition of injustice and the search for identity. True Christianity answers each world, and tells a far better story.

GILEAD AND FUNCTIONAL VALUE

Within Gilead's creepy confines, human beings are mere instruments, and each plays his or her part. Atwood imagines a society in which women are commodities — the wives are ornaments that decorate the home; the Marthas are domestic servants who dust, polish, and cook; and the handmaids are incubators, repeatedly pregnant but never allowed to be mothers. For the latter, defiance is met with monstrous results, even disfigurement — as long as it doesn't affect the reproductive system.

Because of the vanishing birthrate in Gilead, babies are idolized. The Commanders and their wives are consumers who want babies at any cost, so much so that the handmaids who don't conceive are disposable, traded in or thrown away for a better model. Crossing moral boundaries, even in their own rigid system of laws, is overlooked as long as the end product is a baby. Offred is propositioned by her appointed doctor and, indirectly, by Nick, the family's driver, with whom she continues a forbidden affair.

In a twisted irony, the men of Gilead are stripped of dignity as well. They're dubbed "Commanders," but the main men of the story serve as little more than sperm donors. Some, like Fred Waterford, can't even fulfill that function because of their own infertility. Their poor performance leaves them devoid of their wives' respect and affection. Commander Waterford resorts to forbidden bouts of Scrabble and secretive sex escapades to regain some lost sense of conquest.

Though the show's warped value system is overt and rightly despised by viewers, the functional system they themselves live in often eludes them.

FEMINISM AND FUNCTIONAL VALUE

Secular feminism, ultimately, has failed in its quest to make women "equal" because in its quest to liberate women from men, it misses a needed distinction between attributed human value and intrinsic human dignity. Attributed value is functional and arbitrary, and a system that relies on that alone cannot explain why housewives and female chief executive officers deserve the same basic respect and protections. It's why the writings of feminists such as Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique*) attach human worth to an ability — in Friedan's case, the ability to earn wages. If a woman's worth is connected to her paycheck, the roles of housewife and mother are deemed unimportant — mere interruptions to the all-important quest to gain workforce status. More radical feminists who have adopted that premise call women who choose to remain at home leeches to society.²

Under a secular feminist system, some women achieve high-ranking status in the work force, but not all. The responsibilities of raising up the next generation and

tending to the home don't just disappear. While some women claw their way to the top in an effort to matter by feminist standards, others fill the abandoned, "lesser" roles.

Our version of Gilead classifies women by standards other than the color of their garments. We have wealthy, working class, and poor. We have power brokers in stilettos raking in six figures, underpaid and frustrated teachers struggling to shape young minds, daycare workers and nannies paid by the hour, and round-the-clock maid services.³

The desire to earn status is pushing more young women to put off marriage and child-bearing until their biological clocks are running out. Statistics show that between 1970 and 2015, the *average* age a woman delivered her first baby increased from twenty-one years of age to nearly thirty. The most commonly stated reasons? Career and finances.⁴ Fertility is lower than it's ever been. With a needed average of 2.1 children per family to maintain stability in a country, women in the United States average 1.8 as of 2015, the most significant drop having occurred following the economic crisis in 2007.⁵

The pain of infertility is real and keen and is being felt in every facet of society. Instead of turning attention to seek out the cracks in the foundation, the demand for babies by modern families has spurred a race to streamline artificial reproductive technologies (ARTs) and turn profits in ways that exceed ethical limits. The ART discussion is ongoing, mainly because the finish line keeps leaping ahead without heeding the toll. Indeed, the handmaids of our day are middle-class surrogates who need that extra eighty thousand to pay bills, and women — or wombs for rent — purchased at a steal overseas. Bulletin boards on college campuses advertise sizable paydays in exchange for reproductive material, and young women undergo questionable fertility treatments in order to release more eggs to sell to make ends meet. "Leftover" embryos, created in excess because of the higher risk of in-vitro procedures, have resulted in more than half a million "snowflake babies" in the United States alone — cryogenically frozen human beings waiting for a womb in order to be brought to term. With the possible advent of artificial wombs, even "handmaids" may become obsolete.

In a world like this, children aren't gifts. They're commodities that can be obtained at a price, and the cost isn't always monetary.

ABORTION AND FUNCTIONAL VALUE

When children are viewed as commodities, the flip side of the coin is that they're disposable. Elective abortion is a functional value system at its very core, drawing sharp contrast between classes of human beings that matter, and those that don't.

The humanity of the unborn has long been established by science. Embryology textbooks call the zygote "the beginning of a new human being,"⁶ and call fertilization "the critical landmark" at which "a new, genetically distinct human organism is thereby formed."⁷

Philosopher Stephen Schwarz points to only four general categories that distinguish unborn human beings from born ones: size, level of development, environment, and degree of dependency.

It's certainly true that unborn human beings are smaller, but since when does an individual's size determine his value? Kindergarteners are not deemed less deserving of the right to live than teenagers just because they're smaller. If that were true, we would indeed live in a society that values men over women, since women are generally smaller in stature.

Likewise, we can't kill some humans because they're less developed than others. After all, newborns are less developed than toddlers, and teenagers are less developed than their parents in significant ways, none of which make it OK to kill one group and not the other.

Just because unborn children are located somewhere else shouldn't mean that a simple change in location — one that spans less than ten inches — grants them value. Those who claim that a slight change in location can give you worth can use the same reasoning to strip you of it.

Dependent human beings should not be killed because of their dependency. To varying degrees, human beings rely on medications, treatments, or caretakers in order to survive. If total independence is what grants value and the right to live, it gives a whole new (and frightening) spin to survival of the fittest.

None of the functional differences between unborn human beings and the individuals rallying for abortion on demand make it justifiable to have killed them for those reasons at their earliest stages of development. As feminist Camille Paglia, an advocate of abortion, admits, "Liberals for the most part have shrunk from facing the ethical consequences of their embrace of abortion," which she calls "murder, the extermination of the powerless by the powerful."⁸

SEXUAL FREEDOM AND FUNCTIONAL VALUE

The right to unlimited abortion on demand flows, in part, from a desire for sex without consequences. Where sexual freedom becomes the fulcrum of society, individuals are commodified. Human beings, especially women, are reduced to products to be enjoyed at the whims and passions of others. Case in point is a multi-billion-dollar pornography industry, and the elevation of figures such as the late Playboy mogul Hugh Hefner as cultural icons. Sex trafficking is a booming slave trade in our own backyard, its victims far from anything resembling free.

As the train barrels unchecked down the proverbial track, increasing insistence on self-determined gender fluidity is defining "women" and "men" out of existence. It's a trajectory that doesn't threaten the loss of women's rights but the loss of women altogether, as womanhood is redefined by whomever is holding the cultural megaphone. C. S. Lewis, in his *The Abolition of Man*, wrote that as human beings seek to conquer nature, "*Human nature will be the last part of Nature to surrender...The battle will indeed be won. But who, precisely, will have won it?*"⁹

DIGNITY SHINES THROUGH

Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* is difficult to watch. It plucks biblical themes and passages out of context and twists Christianity so that it seems, to the less familiar, hideous.

Gilead is a violent society that controls by fear. What makes the story compelling is not its alleged connections to the current order but the glimmerings of human dignity that refuse to be smothered.

Those glimmerings are most evident in Offred. Unlike the other characters, the viewer has access to Offred's inner and outer lives, which exist in sharp contrast. Her inner dialogue reveals her recognition of the injustice of her situation. At times, her sarcasm is biting and shows a will that won't fully submit to oppression, even as she complies outwardly. By the end of the pilot episode, Offred reveals that her true name is "June," and that she plans to survive in order to find the daughter who was taken from her and then escape Gilead. Viewers can't help but root for her to hang on to sanity and fight back.

Other characters are developed in the show more thoroughly than in the book inasmuch as their backgrounds and side stories affect Offred. The added insight heightens the tension between each character's basic dignity and Gilead's grotesque existence. The viewer can't help but pity Serena Joy Waterford as uncertainty and vulnerability leak through her ice queen exterior — even as she lashes out against Offred to maintain control over her.

A secular worldview can't ground the basic human dignity that gives life to *The Handmaid's Tale*. So where does it come from?

A BETTER STORY

Christianity both grounds and fulfills the dignity and shared longing for justice in our world. It explains — and condemns — the great atrocities human beings are capable of committing since the created order was fractured in the Fall.

But true Christianity *can't* create Atwood's or Miller's Gileads simply because it recognizes that while human beings have attributed value according to their diverse attributes and abilities, they are ultimately equal because of a shared, intrinsic dignity. The first pages of Scripture tell us, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27 ESV). That underlying, unifying dignity is grounded in the Imago Dei. God endows every human being, regardless of function, with an ultimate worth that cannot be stripped away, no matter how many Gileads try.

Women aren't second-class citizens in the City of God. Though patriarchies are described in the biblical accounts, they aren't prescribed. Tamar and Rahab and Ruth were outcasts by cultural standards, but God in His providence knew them, loved them, and grafted them into the lineage of Christ.

Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus revealed the equal intrinsic worth of women in His treatment of them. His exchange with the Samaritan woman at the well, recorded in John 4, seems normal when read through a contemporary lens, but it was shockingly counter to first-century cultural norms. Remember, Christians weren't called to conform to the status quo but to "be transformed by the renewal of [their] mind(s)" (Rom. 12:2 ESV).

In her *Are Women Human?*, Dorothy Sayers wrote:

Perhaps it is no wonder that women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man — there had never been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, who never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them as either “The women, God help us!” or “The ladies, God bless them!”; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously, who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no ax to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious....There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words of Jesus that there was anything “funny” about woman’s nature.¹⁰

The Christian worldview makes the recognition of injustice ring true because it promises an ultimate justice that will prevail. God, who is infinitely just, made a way to appease both our longing and His nature. What we fail to see too often in our own yearning for justice is that we, in our sinful state, stand to receive it ourselves. By taking the root of all injustice on Himself at the crucifixion, He made redemption a reality for us and satisfied not only His justice but also His mercy.

The cross brings our restless searches for identity to an end. “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Col. 3:3–4 ESV). When our lives are secure in Christ, our functions become *get tos* rather than *have tos*. Where Christianity is, there is no need to earn a particular status — just the recognition that you already have it.

In such a world, men and women are walking, talking marvels of unspeakable worth. They are self-controlled, not subject to drift at the beckoning of whims or passions. And children are never products for disposal or sale, but gifts, reflections of life-giving love and unashamed intimacy. Inasmuch as human abilities and traits differ, diversity is celebrated and enjoyed and held together by the unifying thread of human dignity.

FINAL PERSPECTIVE

The Handmaid’s Tale’s contributors are hard at work on a second season that will no doubt continue Offred’s story and explore strands from the book that the first season didn’t.

If red is the trend, there is something far superior to handmaids’ habits that represents hope and change. Fix your gaze on the blood shed at the Cross on your behalf, Christian. It will put the rest into glaring perspective.

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NOTES

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- 2 Beth Impson, *Called to Womanhood: A Biblical View for Today's World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 54–55.
- 3 For more on this idea, see Charlotte Allen, "Living 'The Handmaid's Tale' — Courtesy of the Secular Liberal Elites of L.A.," *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-allen-handmaids-tale-20170502-story.html>.
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- 7 Ronany O'Rahilly and Fabiola Muller, *Human Embryology and Teratology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley-Liss, 1996), 8, 29.
- 8 Camille Paglia, "Fresh Blood for the Vampire," *Salon*, September 10, 2008.
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- 10 Dorothy Sayers, *Are Women Human? Penetrating, Sensible, and Witty Essays on the Role of Women in Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 68.