

TRANSGENDERISM, TRANSSEXUALITY, AND GENDER IDENTITY

2017

According to Scripture, when God created human beings, He created them “male and female” and blessed their marital union (Genesis 1:26–28; 2:20–25). Later authors of Scripture interpreted this twofold act of creation and blessing to entail moral norms such as the mutual cultivation of intimacy between husband and wife and the prohibition of sexual immorality and divorce (c.f., Matthew 19:4–9; Mark 10:5–12; 1 Corinthians 7:12–20; Hebrews 13:4). The prophet Moses, Jesus the Messiah, and the apostle Paul are united in common witness to the goodness of humanity’s biological complementarity and the moral norms that should govern male-female sexual behavior.

Recent decades have witnessed the steady erosion of biblical moral norms governing sexual behavior. As these norms regarding, among others, non-marital sexual intercourse, homosexual activity, marital fidelity, procreation, and divorce have given way in the broader culture to more permissive understandings, new, more fundamental challenges have emerged to the very notion of biological complementarianism itself. This “transgender moment,” as it has been called—in which a person can select a gender identity at variance with their biological sex—requires a biblical and theological appraisal.

How, then, should Bethel Family Worship Center respond to transgender persons?

In this position paper, we set out to answer that question by first understanding the experience of transgender persons in social-scientific terms. Then, we turn to a theological evaluation of the matter in light of what the Bible teaches about the sanctity of the body and about transgender behavior. Finally, we offer guidelines for the church’s ministry to people who struggle with gender identity, a struggle that is difficult for the vast majority of persons—Christian or otherwise—to understand.

A Social-Scientific Analysis of Transgenderism

Gender Identity versus Sexual Identity. “Transgender” is represented by the “T” in the popular initialism LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, with the “+” standing in for any other designation). While the demographics are difficult to come by, transgenderism may be the smallest group within the larger LGBTQIA community. For comparison, homosexuality may represent 1–2 percent of the US population (with men outnumbering women), bisexuality 2–4 percent (with women outnumbering men), intersex 1–4 percent, asexuality 1 percent, and transgenderism at 0.6 percent

based on a broad definition of the term (though some researchers have it even lower than 0.1 percent).¹

“Transgender” can refer to any individual whose gender identity (culturally defined as an internal sense of gender) differs in some way from their birth or biological sex. The term “transsexual” is typically used for those who seek medical assistance to change their biological or birth sex. A significant step in the modern conception of transgenderism was the separation of gender as a social construct from biological sex as a given at birth. To be born female no longer meant someone was limited as a woman according to the expectations of society. As this understanding developed, its fluidity offered significant explanatory power for the transgender experience of gender incongruence (experiencing an internal sense of gender that is at odds with one’s birth or biological sex).

Even though by definition transgenderism is not the same thing as homosexuality, there is enough overlap between the two that some regard transgenderism as homosexuality by another name. For example, if a transgender individual is biologically male but perceives his identity to be female, and is sexually attracted to men, it would be considered a homosexual attraction for those who see the individual as male. On the other hand, that same person might count it as heterosexual because of the identification as female. But what would be the determination if the transgender individual had undergone a sex reassignment surgery? Our culture does not agree on the answer.

Regardless of their inclusion within the LGBTQIA+ initialism, shared political benefits, and the overlap between the transgender and gay communities, transgenderism remains culturally distinguishable from homosexuality, as the former deals with gender identity (identifying as male, female, or other) while the latter deals with sexual orientation (sexual attraction to the same sex). While the overlap between the transgender and homosexual community is recognized, it is important to remember that those who identify as transgender are not necessarily homosexual.

Today “transgender” is typically used as the umbrella term for the myriad of ways in which individuals can experience and express incongruence between their birth sex and their gender identity. “Transgender” has been applied to individuals as varied as children struggling with their sense of gender, drag queens, and intersex individuals born with both male and female traits that do not allow easy identification (though for the reason that they were born without a clear birth sex, many intersex individuals will not accept the trans label). Cross-gender behavior may also cover a variety of expressions ranging from secretly cross-dressing to undergoing sex reassignment surgery. There is no one-size-fits-all explanation of transgenderism, nor a one-size-fits-all response to the pain experienced by transgender individuals.

Understood as a Medical Condition. A common assumption among some doctors is that there is a biological basis for transgenderism, but years of research and debate within the medical community regarding the cause of transgenderism have been inconclusive. Even if a biological basis for transgenderism could be proven, is that basis determinative or does it only provide a disposition for transgenderism that must also take environmental and cultural factors into account? Some recent studies have questioned whether any biological basis can be found for gender as something other than birth sex. Those studies do not suggest that those who experience gender incongruence with their birth sex have chosen that experience, but that factors that seem out of their control in regards to their sense of gender have a psychological and cultural cause along with, or rather than, a biological cause.

Today mental health professionals work to help individuals with their experience of gender incongruence rather than the gender incongruence itself. The third edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) first defined "Gender Identity Disorder" as a mental disorder in which someone identified with a gender other than one's birth sex. By the fifth edition of the DSM (2013), "Gender Identity Disorder" was replaced with "Gender Dysphoria" to remove the stigma associated with the word "disorder." The diagnosis has shifted from gender incongruence as a mental disorder signified by behavior to the discomfort or dysphoria experienced by an individual due to their gender incongruence. Under the new classification, not all people who would be identified as transgender would also be diagnosed with gender dysphoria, such as someone who no longer reported a sense of dysphoria after a sex reassignment surgery. Considering that 41 percent of individuals who experience gender dysphoria will attempt suicide, this tendency in the mental health field to focus on distress is understandable.²

There are four possible outcomes for those seeking treatment for gender dysphoria: (1) gender dysphoria might remain unresolved, (2) it might be resolved in favor of birth sex, (3) it might be managed with intermittent cross-gender behavior (e.g., cross-dressing), or (4) it might be resolved by choosing to fully adopt their preferred gender over their birth sex (including medical options such as sex reassignment surgery).

While some studies of transgender individuals have shown a short-term psychological benefit to sex reassignment surgery, other studies have also shown that the rates of suicide are still abnormally high among those who have fully transitioned. Some blame the cause of continued psychological distress after surgery on the lack of full acceptance by society, but that theory alone may not account for the high number of suicides. Treatment that emphasizes a resolution toward preferred gender could mask problems that resolution alone does not solve. A few mental health professionals have questioned the morality of sex reassignment surgery, especially in light of the lack of hard evidence for a biological

cause to transgenderism. An invasive surgical response, involving the disposal of healthy organs, may not be the ethical solution to what may be a deep-rooted psychological condition. In that case, it may not solve the root problem in the long run. Because of these concerns, some hospitals no longer permit sex reassignment surgeries.

In children diagnosed with gender dysphoria, the treatment options include a wait-and-see approach, encouraging the child to identify as their birth sex, or encouraging the child to identify in accordance with their gender incongruence. This last option may even include providing hormone blockers to delay puberty so that children will have time to enter adolescence before they make the choice of how to resolve their gender incongruence. This last treatment seems irresponsible considering the potential risks of sterility, the impact on bone mass and brain development, and that the majority of children diagnosed with gender dysphoria will not carry that diagnosis into adulthood.

Gender dysphoria does occur throughout the transgender community and brings with it some negative and dangerous behaviors, from body harming activities such as cutting to suicide. To say that it is a psychological condition in need of treatment does not take away from the spiritual dimension of gender dysphoria specifically, or transgenderism in general. This spiritual dimension also calls for help. According to Dr. Mark Yarhouse, an evangelical psychologist, transgender individuals should not be seen as soldiers in a culture war, but rather as its victims. The question that needs to be answered is how the church should respond to the issue of transgenderism and to transgender individuals in a way that is fully in line with God's redemptive plan for all.

A Christian Response

In light of the body. Beyond certain behaviors that can be interpreted as reflections of transgenderism, Scripture does not specifically address a contemporary understanding of gender as a socially constructed concept different from biological sex. A Christian response to transgenderism is better established through a biblical theology of the body rather than by combing the Scriptures for applicable proof texts in light of specific behaviors.

At the heart of the transgender experience is gender incongruence, an internal sense of gender at odds with one's birth sex. A common way to deal with that incongruence is to show a preference for one's internal sense of gender as representing one's true self over against one's body. Some within the church have argued in support of a range of expressions of transgenderism by saying that one's inner self, identified with the soul, should determine gender rather than the body. In other words, if someone with male genitalia has an internal sense of being female, then he should be properly understood as she. The body does not have the vote.

A biblical theology of the body, however, argues for the essentiality of the body in determining our identity. The scriptural witness of the sanctity of the body remains regardless of the shifting cultural understanding of gender. Scripture does not speak about transgenderism as it is understood today, but it still speaks to the transgender community and the church. A biblical theology of the body can aid the church in developing a response to the issue of transgenderism that respects God's intention for and redemption of human beings.

A biblical theology of the body necessarily involves three central Christian doctrines—the creation of humanity, the incarnation of Jesus, and the resurrection of believers. Through these doctrines the scriptural witness about the human body can be fully appreciated. These doctrines also serve as a background for understanding passages which apply more directly to behaviors related to transgenderism.

Genesis 1:26–31 is the record of God creating, blessing, and commanding humanity as male and female. Humans are created in the “image of God” as male and female. The “image of God” refers at least to the role of humanity over creation as representatives of the authority of God. God's blessing of humanity, like God's other blessings throughout Genesis, pertains to continuance, which in this case, means procreation. If humanity is meant to represent God over the earth, then human beings must fill the earth. Hence, God's first command to humanity is to be fruitful and multiply. Creation as male and female makes human fruitfulness, and by extension the calling to act as God's image, possible.

In all of this, the bodily aspect of maleness and femaleness is paramount. To be female and male makes possible the ability to reproduce sexually. Even after the fall of humanity, reproductive ability remains credited to God who created humans as male and female (Genesis 4:1), as does humanity's ongoing status as creations in God's image (Genesis 5:1–3; 9:6). God's creation of humanity as male and female is, at least, because God intends for humans to reproduce.

At most, God's intention for humanity to be female and male may be related to human incompleteness apart from a sexually differentiated other. Genesis 2:18–25 describes the initial relationship between woman and man with God's recognition that “it is not good for the man to be alone.” The “building” of woman from man leads man to recognize himself as male just as he recognizes her as female. Until verse 23, the Hebrew for “man” is *adam*, related to the Hebrew word for ground, *adamah*. “Man” is formed from the dust of the earth in Genesis 2:7 and is named in relationship to the ground. After the creation of woman, *ishshah*, man is identified for the first time as “*ish*,” for woman, *ishshah*, came out of man, *ish*. Man as male remains incomplete without his biologically sexual other, without whom neither she nor he could be known or know themselves as female and male. As many theologians since at least Karl Barth have noted, God may intend humanity to

be in His image as male and female together because it makes humans necessarily relational beings who, not finding completeness apart from each other, also realize their incompleteness apart from God. Our gendered bodies serve as testimonies to our responsibility to live as God's image and to our incompleteness in ourselves individually.

The biblical recognition of two distinct human sexes, female and male, from the creation of humanity as male and female in Genesis 1:26–27, is affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19:4 and Mark 10:6. The Old Testament also narrates the role that sin plays in corrupting human nature, beginning in Genesis 3. The New Testament affirms this corruption of humanity even to the extent of affecting sexual desires (Romans 1:18–32). There is not one aspect of being human or the human experience that is unaffected by fallen-ness, including, but not limited to, biology, reason, spirituality, self-identity, and the relations between all aspects of humanity. The relationship with the Creator and the rest of creation, including other human beings, is also affected by human fallen-ness. Salvation, found in Christ, includes a healing of the effects of fallen-ness so that no aspect of being human or the human experience should be unaffected by God's redemption through the incarnate Lord.

The human body receives no greater honor than in the doctrine of the Incarnation. That the Word of God would become flesh and dwell among humanity (John 1:14) shows that the human body as created by God can embody the presence of God. Jesus was born, lived, and died a fully human life as God in the flesh, yet without sin. His resurrection was a bodily resurrection as a human being, the firstfruits of all those whom God will raise (1 Corinthians 15:20–23).

Jesus lived with all the experience of a human body and all the differentiation a human body possesses in comparison with other human bodies. Jesus grew to a certain height with specific features that made Him identifiable to all who knew Him. He was born with an ancestry that marked Him as Jewish within Israel and the greater Roman world. He had a sexual makeup that identified Him as male. Even the scars on His body, which helped identify Him as the Risen Lord to His followers, remain part of His bodily life after the Resurrection. Jesus experienced all the limitations of a human body, including sleep, hunger, sweat, and pain. While not everything about the body of Jesus is described (His height, weight, complexion, hair color, eye color, etc.), what is described reveals Jesus as a fully embodied human with all that goes with a body, from a genetic heritage to daily hunger.

Jesus remained a fully embodied human being after His resurrection. Jesus is the only concrete example of a final human resurrection. If Jesus rose from the dead with a body that was identifiable, not only as human but as Jesus still bearing the scars of the Crucifixion, then all bodies will be redeemed in the resurrection and still

be identifiable. The body then will be continuous with the body now, though made different by the resurrecting power of God.

The full extent of the redemption of fallen humanity, and thus true human identity, is understood in light of the resurrection of the body. The most significant teachings on the resurrection of the body in the New Testament come from the resurrection accounts of the Gospels and 1 Corinthians 15. Both sources highlight the continuity and discontinuity between human bodies before and after the resurrection, but embodiment itself is assured. In Luke 24 and John 20, Jesus must prove that His resurrection is neither the resuscitation of a corpse nor the apparition of a spirit. Jesus shows He is not an apparition by offering His body to be touched by the disciples and by eating in front of them; His scars prove that He is the same Jesus who was crucified (Luke 24:37–43, John 20:20–27). Proof of His resurrection depends on His continued embodiment, which in turn becomes the guarantee of our physical resurrection. Jesus is no less incarnate as the Risen Lord.

According to many commentators, Paul explains the doctrine of resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 because some within the Corinthian church were denigrating the body to the point of denying the truth or necessity of the Resurrection. He defends the teaching in light of the proven resurrection of Jesus (vv.1–11), which guarantees the future resurrection of humans (vv.12–34). In the last half of the chapter, Paul describes the resurrection through comparison with the body's present expression. Resurrected bodies will be continuous with present bodies like a plant is continuous with the seed from which it springs. While the former bodies are perishable, weak, and "dusty," the resurrected bodies will be imperishable, powerful, and "spiritual." It is the "flesh and blood" of the current bodies that cannot inherit the kingdom of God, but God will grant glorified bodies that can. The difference between the natural and glorified bodies is a difference of mortality, not a difference of embodiment.

The doctrine of the resurrection establishes the continuation of the human body as the intention of God in the salvation of humanity. The God who created humans as whole beings (comprised of body and an immaterial nature) intends for life in the age to come to be as whole beings. Redemption is not complete until bodies are raised to life. While this does not mean that there is no experience of God between physical death and resurrection (2 Corinthians 5:6–8), it does mean that wholeness is not expressed without bodies. The Bible presents human beings as whole unities, as bodies of dust initially enlivened by the breath of God (Genesis 2:7) who will one day become bodies of glory vitalized by the Spirit of God. No account of heaven that makes the final resurrection anticlimactic can be considered a Christian view of the afterlife.

True human identity is what is being realized in relationship with Christ, body and an immaterial nature, which will culminate in the Resurrection. No account of

humanity that asserts the interior life as the true self over against the body is a biblical understanding of humanity. The true self is a whole being, redeemed and restored through the work of Christ to a glorious resurrection that reflects God's final intention for embodied humanity. That resurrection involves the whole body, because gendered bodies were part of God's good creation and not a result of the Fall, because humanness will not be less as redeemed than it was as fallen, and because the assumption from the Gospels' accounts is that Jesus was still recognized as a whole being after His resurrection.

One biblical teaching of Jesus that may call this into question is found in Matthew 22:23–32 and Mark 12:18–27. The Sadducees had challenged the belief in the resurrection by offering Jesus a case concerning one woman who, in accordance with the law of Moses, had married seven brothers in turn but outlived them all without producing children. Their question as to whose wife she would be in the resurrection was intended to show the problems introduced by a literal resurrection for their belief in the eternal validity of the Law. Jesus responded by challenging their knowledge of both the Law and the power of God. He teaches that in the resurrection humans will be as the angels in neither marrying nor giving away someone in marriage (Matthew 22:30; Mark 12:25). Some have taken this to mean that resurrected bodies will be like angelic bodies, with the assumption that if angels are not gendered, then neither will we be gendered in the resurrection. However, Jesus is only saying that the institution of marriage will not exist after the resurrection any more than it exists among the angels. The purpose served by marriage in this age will not be needed in the age to come. This passage should not be taken to mean that the body will be lacking in the resurrection in comparison to the present body.

The promise of the resurrection serves as a focus for a developing identity in Christ, for completed humanity in Christ will be fulfilled at the resurrection of the body. It is the resurrection even more than the doctrine of creation that highlights the sanctity of the body, as it is clear that God's final intention for humans is existence as embodied beings. This theology of the body as essential to our true self cannot be denied when dealing with gender incongruence no less than the pain of gender incongruence can be ignored when ministering to those who suffer from gender dysphoria. The desire on the part of many who suffer gender incongruence to find resolution by changing their body is a sign of the importance of the body to human identity.

True sympathy must be extended to those in pain even if a solution that so completely prioritizes the interior over the exterior cannot be embraced because of belief in the sanctity of the body and the wholeness of human beings. This does not mean that those who struggle with gender incongruence are sinning, nor does it mean that attempts to resolve the incongruence against the body should be regarded as intentional rebellion against God rather than as a fight for survival. A

community in which 41 percent of its members attempt suicide is a community of people in pain. While the Bible does not directly address transgender identity or a transgender lifestyle as such, it does recognize that individuals may make choices that are purposely at variance with their birth sex. No one has a full understanding of what causes gender incongruence, but certain behaviors which reflect a transgender identity are morally inappropriate in accordance with a Christian theology of the body. This is not to say that there should be an entirely rigid and unreasonable standard for expressing a particular gender based on cultural stereotypes. Not all behaviors carry the same meaning regardless of culture or context. However, the absence of any standards or boundaries, and the refusal to recognize our collective bodily human existence as male and female as the intentions of our Creator, leads to a confusion that negatively affects our culture as a whole.

In light of behavior. The most commonly cited verse on cross-gender behavior is Deuteronomy 22:5, “A woman must not wear men’s clothing, nor a man wear women’s clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this” (NIV). This verse is found in a section of Deuteronomy 22 which focuses on the respect for both human and animal life (verses 1–8). Verses 9–11 remind people not to mix what should remain distinct while the last half of the chapter covers regulations for protecting the integrity of marriage and individuals wronged by others sexually. Read together, these laws are concerned with the protection of life both within nature and within marriage. Life and sex go hand in hand, and protection of the former calls for protection of the latter. If, as many commentators believe, Deuteronomy 12 through 26 should be understood as ordered in light of the Ten Commandments, then Deuteronomy 22 contains laws pertaining both to the sixth and seventh commandments, prohibiting murder and adultery.

The judgment on cross-dressing in verse 5 is that it is a “detestable thing” (*toebah*) or an abomination to God. The Hebrew *toebah* is used throughout the Old Testament for ritual and ethical activities that God detests including idolatry (Deuteronomy 7:25) and sexual immorality (Leviticus 18:29), but also for other violations of proper order including unethical business practices (Deuteronomy 25:13–16) and troublemaking (Proverbs 6:16–19). Cross-dressing in this verse has been interpreted to be a reference to homosexuality (cross-dressing understood as a kind of sexual role-play) or a reference to transvestite behavior found in the pagan worship of other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, as in the cult of Ishtar or Canaanite fertility cults. It may be in that context that any behavior which dissolved distinctions between the sexes offered support for pagan versions of prostitution or goddess worship. However, even if prostitution or goddess worship is no longer the context, the text does not support behavior which disrespects a biologically based gender.

When read within the context of both Genesis 1:26–27 and Deuteronomy 22 as a whole, this behavior is prohibited because it does not respect the sanctity of human bodies as male and female, for whatever reason those distinctions are dissolved. It is not a prohibition against a culturally specific form of dress, but a prohibition against cross-dressing as cross-dressing, the intended dressing as the opposite sex as understood within that culture without respect for a biologically based gender. Like other laws in Deuteronomy, this law is written in light of the practices of surrounding nations because Israel is called as a people set apart by God. Witnessing to the good order of God’s creation represents a significant way that Israel can stand apart among the other nations. Humanity survives and thrives as female and male. Otherwise, humanity cannot fill the earth and thus fulfill God’s command to act as God’s image over all creation, which includes the care of all life, animal as well as human (Deuteronomy 22:1–8). Israel is called to represent the order of creation (Deuteronomy 22:9–11). Deuteronomy 22:5 must be read in light of the call for humanity to act as God’s image and for Israel to reflect God’s order to other nations.

A final verse in Deuteronomy that is sometimes referenced by critics of transgender behavior is Deuteronomy 23:1, “No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord.” Deuteronomy 23:1–8 deals with those who may not enter the assembly of Israel, either in the context of worship or the context of leadership. Eunuchs were made such in the Ancient Near East for both religious reasons and certain forms of political service. That particular restriction is abolished by the time of Isaiah (Isaiah 56:2–5). As the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 makes clear, eunuchs are acceptable to God through Jesus. To apply the restriction of eunuchs from the assembly of God’s people in Deuteronomy 23 to transsexuals today, regardless of the weakness of that application, is meaningless in light of the lifting of that restriction in Isaiah 56 and the example from Acts 8. Jesus himself declares one can become a eunuch for the sake of God’s kingdom in Matthew 19:12 (a reference to the abstention from marriage for the sake of service to God).

Another passage cited against transgender behavior is 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 where Paul lists a series of “wrongdoers” who will not enter the kingdom of God including *malakos* and *arsenokoites*. While the latter term denotes a homosexual as one who lies with a man as with a woman, there is debate over the meaning of the first term, which can be translated “soft one.” Most scholars believe it refers to the passive partner in a homosexual relationship, with *arsenokoites* referring to the active partner. Some argue that *malakos* is a reference to effeminate men or men who in some significant way play the part of a woman. Under this interpretation, transgender behaviors like cross-dressing are condemned by Paul. As *malakos* comes between two words for sexual wrongdoers, it is safer to assume sinful sexual behavior is what Paul intends by this word rather than behaviors we might associate with transgenderism.

The latter half of 1 Corinthians 6 may be more instructive in regards to certain behaviors associated with transgenderism. Paul rebukes members of the Corinthian church for visiting prostitutes. Many commentators assume that their rationalization for this behavior was an overly spiritualized or dualistic understanding of Christianity whereby actions committed by the body did not matter in light of the importance of the soul. Paul responds by highlighting the centrality of the body as part of our Christian identity. The physical body is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, as that body will be resurrected by God. If the body is a member of Christ, then it cannot become one flesh with a prostitute. Paul stresses the sanctity of the physical body. It was paid for by God, united with Christ, and is now a temple of the Holy Spirit. The body is no longer one's own to do with as one pleases. Even though Paul's command to glorify God with the body is in response to sexual immorality, the justification he gives for that command covers more than avoidance of sexual immorality. If the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, belonging to God, which will be one day resurrected, it should not be rejected or devalued in the meantime.

Finally, 1 Corinthians 11:2–12 is sometimes cited with the assumption that cross-dressing is the problem Paul is seeking to address. Paul commands women to pray with their heads covered while men should pray with their heads uncovered in respect to their gender in the context of worship. One contested explanation of this passage has been that worship within the pagan temples of Corinth involved cross-dressing, and Paul is concerned to distinguish Christian worship from pagan worship by ensuring gender distinction is respected. Regardless of the background, Paul clearly argues for the respect of gender distinction in worship.

Paul stresses the importance of woman and men respecting their nature in the course of their worship and ministry to the church, for men and women need one another (see again Genesis 2:18–24). Differences of gender do not restrict women from praying or prophesying any more than men. The call is to value each one's gender so that the community will be complete by respecting the differences therein, but in communion with each other. Dissolving those distinctions disrespects one sex as much as it does the other, and may disrespect the body overall. The call is to glorify God with the body (1 Corinthians 6:20) and to respect their identities as male and female in the context of worship and Christian community (1 Corinthians 11:2–12).

A Practical Application of the Theology of the Body

How should Bethel Family Worship Center respond to transgender persons?

The question should be reframed in terms of the Great Commission, which is to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). Framed this way, the Church's ministry to transgender persons is essentially the same as its ministry to all

persons: *evangelism* that leads to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, symbolized by baptism, and *discipleship* that teaches converts to obey the commandments of Jesus Christ in ever-increasing measure.

This is not to deny that transgender persons present unique discipleship challenges. For example, how should children's ministers respond—both to the child and to his or her parents—when a child in the church expresses gender dysphoria? If a transgender person (who has undergone surgery and hormone treatment to acquire the external appearance of a member of the opposite sex) comes to faith in Jesus Christ, what does repentance look like for him or her?

Given the theology of the body articulated in the preceding paragraphs, it should be clear that the Church's ministry to transgender persons should help them experience increasing integrity between their birth sex and their gender identity. This is a long-term discipleship goal. However, it is not the only discipleship goal, nor even the first issue that needs to be addressed in the lives of transgender persons. The most fundamental issue in the lives of all persons, after all, is whether they are "in Christ," to use the apostle Paul's term. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). The practical question, then, is how to create an optimal environment for transgender persons to experience new life in Christ.

The first characteristic of such an environment is *self-examination*. Jesus' famous saying regarding the speck and the plank (Matthew 7:3–5) is germane. Bible-believing churches rightly critique contemporary society's warped understandings and immoral practices when it comes to sex. However, there is often a failure to address unloving attitudes toward people with views and practices that are different. Ministry to transgender persons—and LGBT persons more generally—acknowledges and repents of unloving words and deeds that have been spoken or done toward them.

Hospitality is the second characteristic. Social science indicates that transgender persons experience elevated levels of violence, rejection, loneliness, and suicidal thoughts. Contemporary political discourse—which treats transgenderism as a front in the culture war over sexual mores—exacerbates their feelings of alienation and unwelcomeness. A pastoral response to transgender persons cannot even begin if they experience an unloving, unwelcome environment in the local church. Hospitality, by contrast, welcomes people at the point at which they are met. The Pharisees and scribes said of Jesus, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). Shouldn't the Church follow Jesus' lead in this regard?

A third characteristic of an optimal environment is *holism*. The temptation pastors must face down is the reduction of transgender persons to their gender dysphoria and related behaviors, as if the adjective *transgender* exhausted the meaning of the

noun *person*. Gender dysphoria is a discipleship issue to be sure, but so are lack of faith, prayerlessness, biblical illiteracy, theological error, the deeds of the flesh, etc. Pastors who neglect to address these issues are failing to help transgender persons develop a relationship with Jesus Christ, a biblical worldview, spiritual practices, and a gospel-centered narrative that will in turn help those persons address their gender dysphoria and related behaviors.

A final characteristic is *patience*. Gender dysphoria is shaped over a lifetime by complex causes. Experience teaches that feelings of incongruity between one's birth sex and gender identity usually do not instantly disappear when a transgender person converts. Of course, the same is true for besetting sins, bad habits, and long-term struggles such as substance addiction. While there are genuine testimonies of instantaneous deliverance, these are rare. Discipleship usually consists of "a long obedience in the same direction," as one writer has described it. And, as transgender persons undertake this long obedience, a pastoral response to them must be patient, encouraging, correcting, and forgiving of them all along the way. "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?" (Romans 2:4).

All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible.

NOTES

1. Statistics on the population of LGBTQIA population in the United States and in the world are notoriously difficult to estimate. See Gary Gates, "How many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender?" *The Williams Institute*, April 2011; "A Survey of LGBT Americans: Attitudes, Experiences and values in changing times" from the Pew Research Center, June 13, 2013; "Sexual Orientation and Health Among U.S. Adults: National Health Interview Survey, 2013," *National Health Statistic Report*, June 14, 2014; "How sexually dimorphic are we? Review and synthesis," *American Journal of Human Biology* 12:151–166; and "How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?" *The Williams Institute*, June 2016.

2. See "Suicide Attempts among Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Adults: Findings of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey," *The Williams Institute*, January 2014.