

How should we respond to transgender people?

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I have to admit that whenever I ask you for Qs from the pews, I'm always a little nervous about what I'm going to get. Last year in particular, I thought 'I hope no one asks me about transgender stuff' because I really didn't feel like I knew enough to talk about it accurately. And fortunately, no one did. I'm still no expert, but after another year of thinking on it, I think I'm ready to talk about it.

Which is a good thing, because I got the question this year. Here it is –

Should we be doing more to stop all of the confusing gender issues being taught at school to children of all ages? I feel so badly for the teachers too. Where will it all end? When they use "they, them", it just sounds as though they are completely confused and lost. Should we just be standing back and letting it happen? Is it God's will?

Lots of good questions there and so we have a lot to talk about today. Not just because this person has asked a lot of questions but because the subject itself is so complex. What is transgender? What is cisgender? Is it a psychological diagnosis or a social phenomenon? What about pronouns? As Christians, how do we respond? What should we do about it? Those are important questions that we will spend our time on here today.

Before we start though, I want to frame our discussion like this – these are our kids and grandkids that we're talking about here. When we talk about 'transgender issues,' it's very easy to get hung up on the 'issues' part to miss out on the fact that these are real-life, honest to goodness people that we are talking about here. And chances are good that some of us will have kids or grandkids who come up to us at some point and say 'grandma, I know you're used to me being a boy but I want you to know that I'm actually a girl.' I want to help you to think through now how you will respond then with truth and with grace. Susan Zuidema (who was here to talk to us about supportive housing for youth over at Why Not) has written a really helpful book for parents in this situation; she says "The ideals to which Christians strive do not leave room for hateful thoughts, words or actions."ⁱ

So with that in mind, let's just ask and answer some of the most basic questions related to transgender people before we get into some of the larger issues that this person is asking about. And let's start with the most basic of all – what does 'transgender' mean?

To answer that, we need to talk about two very important concepts – sex and gender. Scientifically speaking, 'sex' is the objective, biological features that a person is born with – their chromosomes – XX for female, XY for male – their genes, their reproductive organs. That's an objective fact and no serious scientists really contest that.ⁱⁱ

'Gender' on the other hand is the internal, personal sense of being male or female and how that shapes the way that we interact with other people and present ourselves to the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

So – sex – has to do with the physical and gender has to do with the psychological and social.

Now, traditionally, ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ have been interconnected ideas. If your sex is male, then your gender is ‘man.’ If your sex is female, then your gender is woman. To quote the famous Arnold Schwarzenegger movie *Kindergarten Cop*, ‘boys have a penis, girls have a vagina.’ That has been assumed for thousands of years.

Recently though (1950’s and 60’s),^{iv} transgender advocates have begun to argue that sex and gender are NOT in fact related and that while you may be born with the sexual markers of a maleness, your gender identity may in fact not be male. Susan Stryker, for example, argues that “The sex of the body ... does not bear any *necessary* or *predetermined* relationship to the social category in which the body lives or to the identity and subjective self of the person who lives in the world through that body.”^v

The argument here would be that while you are born with a certain sex, your gender identity is socially constructed – we build it ourselves out of options available to us in our culture – and so we can define our gender however we see fit.

Now for some people, that means saying that while they were born male, they are in fact female – sex is male but gender is female – and that’s what you’d call a transgender woman. On the other hand, some people are born female but say that they are actually male – transmen.^{vi} These people would say that they were simply assigned the wrong gender at birth and now they are exercising their right to identify not as their sex but as their gender.

Other people though will argue that male and female are inadequate for describing their experience of their gender and so this is where the terminology of non-binary comes in. You know Caitlyn Jenner, formerly Bruce Jenner? He was born male but transitioned to female but you’ll notice, that person is still playing within the binary bounds of male and female. Some people though will say that ‘male’ or ‘female’ are inadequate to describe their experience of gender and so they use the language of non-binary or gender fluid or genderqueer. They believe that gender is more of a spectrum, ranging from male to female and they can move back and forth, or even off that spectrum entirely. That’s non-binary or gender fluid, depending on who you talk to.

So, to summarize, you’ve got sex and gender (physical and internal) and when those match, you have a cisgender person. Like me. Like the traditional understanding of sex of gender. If they don’t match, then you’ve got a transgender person, who regardless of their physical sex, they determine their own gender, be it trans-man, trans-woman, non-binary or gender fluid.

Now on top of that, you have the further reality of something called ‘gender dysphoria.’ This is a legitimate psychological diagnosis in the DSM-5 – that’s the standard manual for mental health diagnoses^{vii} – ‘Gender dysphoria’ describes the feeling of distress associated with incongruence between one’s biological sex and their gender identity.^{viii} So a person could

legitimately go to a psychiatrist with the feeling of distress stemming from the fact that they feel like a person of the opposite sex living in the wrong body. That's a psychiatric diagnosis that some people have (but it's not required to consider yourself trans).

I know that there are some people who will hear that and say 'that's bologna' but I think that to be fair, we need to give people a fair hearing. Just because I've never had an eating disorder doesn't mean that anorexia is not real or powerful; I think we need to say the same thing about gender dysphoria and listen to people who are suffering from it.

A NY Times columnist put it like this: "Dysphoria feels like being unable to get warm, no matter how many layers you put on. It feels like hunger without appetite... it feels like grieving... [while] having nothing to grieve."^{ix}

Another person online put it like this –

"... an electric current through my body that caused my joints to ache, my stomach [to] turn, my hands [to] shake, and nausea in the most severe moments of dysphoria. Laying in bed at night, it almost felt that the electric circuits in my body didn't quite match up, like cramming two wrong puzzle pieces together."^x

It would seem that gender dysphoria is a legitimate experience that we need to think about in the larger question of transgender people.

Before we do that though, I think that we need to change gears and think about this from God's point of view. So far, everything I've said is pretty standard in the field of gender studies and I hope that that has given you a sense of the broader conversation that's happening in our culture. Because it's important to know what's going on and important to be able to engage, when say, a grandchild comes to you and says they're 'gender fluid.'

But before we reach any conclusions, there's another voice we need to hear and that's God's voice, through His Word. The Bible is ultimately our authority in life and faith and so we need to think carefully about what God says about these issues and arguments around transgender experience.

So what does the Bible say about transgender people?

Well, to be honest, there's no chapter and verse that I can point you to because frankly, the idea that sex and gender are not intimately linked is a very recent innovation. The Bible just doesn't talk in those terms. As Kevin DeYoung puts it: "The Bible believes in the organic unity of biological sex and gender identity."^{xi} But I think that there are two very compelling lines of evidence that we need to consider – first – the way God made us and second – the way He distinguishes between male and female.

Let's look at those one at a time. Turn with me to Genesis 1, starting in verse 26 and we'll think about how God made us.

Verse 26, God says: ~~26 Then God said,~~ "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Gen 1:26-27 NIV).

When God decided to make someone to be His representatives here on Earth, He created human beings. 'In the image of God He created them.' He made people who would reflect His character to the world and take care of all that He had created. But in doing that, God didn't just create a series of sexually identical human beings – He made them male and female. He made humanity with a binary sexual distinction. He made males and He made females.

That's Genesis 1; Genesis 2 doubles down on that fact. God creates all the animals then He creates the man and says (2:18) 'it's not good for man to be alone; I will make a helper and partner for him.' So, what does He create? He creates not another man but a woman. From the very beginning, God created a binary distinction between men and women.

Now to be fair, you could argue that this is only talking about sex – the biological fact of maleness and femaleness. Adam was male, Eve was female and together, their reproductive organs enabled them to create new life, just like God had done. There is no question that God created two distinct sexes and only two distinct sexes, but what about the question of gender?

That, I think, is where the other stream of evidence comes in. There are a handful of places in the Bible where God calls us not to represent ourselves in ways that contrast with our sex.

So Deuteronomy 22:5 for example says - 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. (Deu 22:5 NIV).

1 Corinthians 6:9 refers negatively to '*malakoi*,' the Greek word that you would use to talk about 'effeminate men;' men who dress and act like ladies.

And then a few chapters later, 1 Corinthians 11 establishes the idea that there are things that are appropriate for women to wear in worship and that there are things appropriate for men to wear.

Now this I think is really interesting because it pushes us into the realm of gender identity. We've moved beyond just biological sex and moved into the realm of how we express that sexuality – **that's** gender. Let's use Deuteronomy 22:5 as a case study. There in Deuteronomy 22:5, it says that a woman should not wear men's clothes, nor a man woman's clothes.

Just to take the first one – it says 'a woman should not wear men's clothes.' 'Woman' is a marker of sex, her physical, biological reality. Clothing, though, is a marker of gender and that's

socially constructed. We as a society agree together on what's appropriate for the male sex and what's appropriate for the female sex and we live that that in the back of our minds.

A hundred years ago, all of the ladies here would probably be wearing dresses and all of the men would be wearing slacks. That's not because pants are inherently 'male;' it's because that was the convention that their culture deemed acceptable to live by. I don't bat an eye though when Joyce walks in wearing pants because the social meaning that we have constructed together as a society says that pants are just as appropriate for ladies as they are for men. That's a social construct and we make use of those social constructs to express our gender identities.

Deuteronomy 22:5 then says 'listen, if your sex marks you as a female, don't use male gendered clothing to say that you are actually a man.' Alternatively, if you are a man, don't use female gendered clothing to say that you aren't.

Genesis 1 and 2 then say that God created us male and female. Not gender fluid but in one of two 'sex' categories – male and female. Passages like Deuteronomy 22:5 and others suggest that we should confuse those categories by using socially constructed expressions of gender which say that we belong to the other sex.

And this is the main reason why I believe that choosing to be transgender is inconsistent with God's ways; expressing gender in a way that contradicts your sex and claiming to be something that you are not.

Now I know that trans* advocates would say – 'well, you're just a heteronormative bigot unwilling to acknowledge that sex and gender have no real and necessary correlation.'

To which I would say, when you unhitch sex and gender, then you have effectively emptied gender of any real meaning. I spent way too much time this week reading through LGBTQ+ advocacy resources to see how they define gender and I got lost in their attempts to define gender without any relationship to sex.

In practical terms, if a woman's lived experience is not in any way shaped by her biological sex, then you have effectively voided 'being a woman.' A woman's lived experience is not exclusively shaped by her biological sex but it certainly plays a part. And the same is true for men. If my gender identity has nothing to do with my biological sex, then you've effectively emptied maleness of any meaning.

And that's a problem in God's eyes, because, in creating us in His image, He made us male and female. He made us men and women. To say then that being a man is what you want it to be or that being a woman is what you want it to be is saying that you know better than God and that's wrong. The evidence in the Bible leads me to believe that actively choosing to present

yourself in a way that is inconsistent with your sex is inconsistent with the will of God and the way that He has established for human flourishing.

Now, that being said, there are a TON of implications that spin out from that, and this is where it is important to remember – we’re potentially talking about someone’s grandkid here. We’re potentially talking about someone’s child.

There are legitimately people who suffer from gender dysphoria – the psychological experience of feeling a disconnect between their sex and their gender. We need to be very sensitive to people with this experience. If they are legitimately struggling with this feeling of unsettledness then we need to embrace them and walk with them and encourage them on this difficult road. The statistics around suicidality and trans experience are staggering; studies suggest that upwards of 40% of transgender people have attempted suicide and LGBTQ youth “...contemplate suicide three times more often than heterosexual youth.”^{xii} That’s awful and the last thing we want to do is contribute to the problem. As Christians, our job is to love others as Jesus first loved us – fully, completely, before we got our act together – and trans youth need our support to carefully walk this road.

So that being said, let’s go back to our question from the beginning because there were a lot of issues wrapped up in that one question.

So here it is again –

Should we be doing more to stop all of the confusing gender issues being taught at school to children of all ages? I feel so badly for the teachers too. Where will it all end? When they use "they, them", it just sounds as though they are completely confused and lost. Should we just be standing back and letting it happen? Is it God's will?

In my mind, there are three questions there that we need to address:

1. Should we be doing more to stop all of the confusing gender issues being taught at school?
2. What about pronouns?
- And 3. What is God’s will in all of this?

Let’s look at these one at a time.

First -

1. Should we be doing more to stop all of the confusing gender issues being taught at school?

Here I’m going to defer to Susan Zuidema who spent many years teaching in the public school system before going over to Why Not. In her book, she acknowledges the danger of this sort of teaching in schools but reminds us of the influence that we all have in shaping the lives of our children and grandkids. She writes:

“As believers, we cannot accept homosexuality or transgenderism as human qualities that are morally sound, helpful or true. Instead, we need to instruct our children in gentleness and forbearance – in the art of agreeing to disagree – but we need to make a clear distinction between tolerance and acceptance. We tolerate the practice. We accept the person... With our example – Jesus, friend of sinners – how can we do any less?”^{xiii}

Beyond that, I think that probably the best thing for us to do as Christians is have these conversations from time to time and to humbly live out the gender distinctions that God has given us.

Now that’s not to say that we should live according to stereotypes, because not every man is going to love football and fast cars and not every woman is going to like doilies and shopping. Again, Susan Zuidema is really helpful here because while she denies that there’s a spectrum from male to female – it’s a binary male OR female sort of thing – she acknowledges that masculinity and femininity are both expressed on their own spectrums. You can have tomboyish girls and girly girls and they’re all precious to God. You can have sensitive men and warrior men and everything in between. Susan Zuidema says:

“The key message for parents to deliver is that their son can be himself and still be an excellent boy. Your daughter can be true to her interests and still be an incredible girl. You children’s interests or self-expression do not change their sexuality and gender.”^{xiv}

And I wonder, to a degree, if some of the people who are questioning their sexuality are doing it simply because they don’t line up with the stereotypes associated with their gender; I’m no manly man and I’ve certainly felt a degree of incongruence in the past because I’m not overly hand around the house, but I don’t think that that necessary means that I should wonder if I’m actually a lady. I think it just means that I need to be the kind of man that God has made me to be.

I think that churches have a special responsibility to not perpetuate gender stereotypes, but humbly live with the knowledge that there are different kinds of men and there are different kinds of women and that that’s ok.

Because one thing that really concerns me is what some researchers have called ‘rapid onset gender dysphoria.’ Historically, the majority of transgender people have tended to go male to female and experience their dysphoria over a long period of time. Recently though, the trends have switched and there has been a surge in teen girls questioning their sexuality out of the blue and it sure does seem that peer groups and social media play a large role in that. To be fair, it may simply be that the growing acceptance of trans* people in our culture has led to a lot of teen girls ‘coming out’ but the numbers are huge – like 4000-5000% increase in female to male transitions over the last ten years.^{xv} And just anecdotally, there are so many stars and influencers on social media leading the charge to come out as trans or bi or gender fluid, how can they not have an impact on the lives of our young people?

As a church, we need to be a place where it is safe for people to work out all the confusing things that the world is saying and to love and support people along the way.

2. What about pronouns? That's a tough one and there are two main streams of thought in churches like ours right now.

The first would say that Christians are called to speak the truth in love and so to call someone by pronouns which did not match their biological sex would be to perpetuate falsehood. Somebody like Denny Burk makes the point well:

I must never encourage or accommodate transgender fictions with my words. In fact, I have an obligation to expose them. For me, that means that I may never refer to a biological male with pronouns that encourage him to think of himself as a female. Likewise, I may never refer to a biological female with pronouns that encourage her to think of herself as a male.^{xvi}

That's one way of thinking about it; the other is what I've seen called 'pronoun hospitality.' The idea here is to meet people where they're at and use their preferred pronouns as a way to build a bridge to them. A practicing Christian clinical psychologist, Mark Yarhouse, says "It is an act of respect, even if we disagree, to let the person determine what they want to be called. If we can't grant them that, it's going to be next to impossible to establish any sort of relationship with them."^{xvii}

There's a really interesting insight in Preston Sprinkle's book *Embodied*. One of his colleagues interviewed trans* people to see what they thought about Christians using preferred pronouns and he found that trans* people didn't assume that a Christian using preferred pronouns automatically meant that the Christian affirmed everything about the way that person expressed their gender. They really took it more as an act of basic courtesy and respect.^{xviii}

To be honest, I think that this is a classic example of "in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity." I get where both are coming from and I would have no problem with people doing either of them. Personally, I think I would just tend towards gender neutral pronouns and leave it at that. I mean, we already do that, in a sense, with 'they.' When the LCW are meeting, I don't have to clarify that 'they, female' are meeting, we just use that gender neutral pronoun and move on. But again, "in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity."

And maybe most important of all 3. What is God's will in all of this?

That's a good question. I DON'T think that God's will is for us to toss sex and gender out the window as if they were meaningless concepts; God made us male and female and He made us male and female for good reasons and it would not be smart to deviate from that. For that reason, I think that it is important for us to hold to a traditional, Genesis 1 and 2 defined view of human sexuality.

That being said though, I also think that Preston Sprinkle is right when he says -

“The Bible’s primary invitation to every Christian is not to act more like a man or to act more like a woman, but to act more like Jesus.”^{xix}

And Jesus consistently acted with gracious, life-giving love towards confused people. Think about the lady in John 4 who had a habit of running through husbands like they were Kleenexes. Or the tax collector who thought life was all about getting the most toys. (\$\$). Or think about the woman caught in adultery. Jesus embraced each of those people where they were, but loved them too much to leave them there – He helped them towards the truth that sets them free.

We need to do the same.

In practical terms, I think Preston Sprinkle is helpful when he says -

This means that when someone tells you they’re trans* and invites you into relationship, the best thing you can do is ask them what they mean by trans*. Don’t interrogate... To listen is to love.... Truly listen. Listen with the goal of understanding and loving the person who’s willing to tell us their story.^{xx}

And I really value Mark Yarhouse’s insight as a practicing psychologist. He writes (especially to parents) “First, when teenagers make decisions about gender expression, they are often still asking the question ‘Do you love me? We want to make sure they know that they are loved. Second, your loved one may be managing their dysphoria [by doing things like wearing their hair atypical of their sex or doing their nails] rather than intending to reject social norms or specific teachings of a faith community. We have found it is better to recognize strategies for what they are and honour their function, before inviting a person to consider any alternatives.”^{xxi}

The question of gender identity is not going away and I am sure that we will have this same conversation again many times down the road. In all that we do, may we be a community that holds to the truth, and loves people with God’s grace.

BENEDICTION

2 Corinthians 13:11 - Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

ⁱ Susan Zuidema, *My child, my chance*, 13.

ⁱⁱ Sexual dimorphism among non-intersex humans is an established, observable, objective, scientific, the-earth-is-round-and-not-flat sort of fact. “[A]n organism is male or female if it is structured to perform one of the respective roles in reproduction,” and “[t]here is no other widely accepted biological classification for the sexes” (Preston Sprinkle, *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say*, 38).

ⁱⁱⁱ “Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of girls, women, boys, men, and gender diverse people. It influences how people perceive themselves and each other, how they act and interact, and the distribution of power and resources in society” <https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/48642.html>

^{iv} Mark Yarhouse and Julia Sadusky, *Emerging Gender Identities*, 12.

^v Susan Stryker, quoted in Yarhouse and Sadusky, 16.

^{vi} ‘Just remember—the “woman” or “man” in these terms refers to how a person identifies’ (Preston Sprinkle, *Embodied*, 34).

^{vii} For the American Psychiatric Association.

^{viii} Yarhouse and Sadusky, 5.

^{ix} <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/24/opinion/sunday/vaginoplasty-transgender-medicine.html>

^x <https://www.centerforfaith.com/blog/sex-gender-and-transgender-experiences-part-2-biological-sex-and-gender-role> | <https://www.centerforfaith.com/comment/43#comment-43>

^{xi} <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/what-does-the-bible-say-about-transgenderism/>

^{xii} Bridget Eileen Rivera, *Heavy Burdens*, 15.

^{xiii} Zuidema, 34.

^{xiv} Zuidema, 101.

^{xv} <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/09/16/minister-orders-inquiry-4000-per-cent-rise-children-wanting/>;

Abigail Shrier, *Irreversible damage*, 26; <https://www.genderhq.org/increase-trans-females-nonbinary-dysphoria/>;
Sprinkle, *Embodied*, 162.

^{xvi} Preston Sprinkle, *Embodied*, 202.

^{xvii} In Sprinkle, *Embodied*, 205.

^{xviii} Sprinkle, *Embodied*, 285.

^{xix} Sprinkle, *Embodied*, 94.

^{xx} Sprinkle, *Embodied*, 59.

^{xxi} Yarhouse and Sadusky, “A Measured Response,” 162.