

But What About...Part 2: Trapped in the Wrong Body? Transgender Identity

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Introduction

- Growing prominence of transgender individuals in our culture
 - According to a 2016 survey, approximately 1.4 million adults (0.6% of the adult population) in the US identify as transgender; this is approximately double the rate estimated by a survey using data from the mid-2000s¹
 - Representation in popular media: Bruce/Caitlyn Jenner, Laverne Cox (*Orange is the New Black*), Amazon TV series *Transparent*
- Political changes and public expectations
 - After the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in 2015, the focus of political debates about gender and sexuality rapidly shifted to a variety of questions related to transgender identity, including: public bathrooms, public school curricula, transgender athletes, whether transgender individuals have the right to serve in all branches of the military and what accommodations must be made for them, whether gender identity is “protected” under federal laws which prohibit “discrimination” (in the same way that race is), whether Medicare and private health insurers should be required to cover “gender-affirming surgery” (also known as a “sex change operation”) and hormone treatments, etc.
- While the transgender political movement is rapidly gaining steam, many transgender individuals are still personally vulnerable
 - According to one survey, 40% of transgender individuals in the US have attempted suicide at some point in their lifetime, compared to 4.6% of the general US population.² According to a survey conducted in Sweden, “those diagnosed with gender incongruence were about six times as likely to have had a health care visit due to a mood or anxiety disorder in 2015...and more than six times as likely to have been hospitalized after a suicide attempt.”³

Rather than immediately jumping into the fires of current political controversy, I would like to begin by stepping back and looking at the larger biblical story and its implications for understanding gender identity. But first, let me define a few terms as they are commonly used today.

Defining Terms

1. **“Sex** refers to a person’s biological status...There are a number of indicators of biological sex, including sex chromosomes, gonads, internal reproductive organs, and external genitalia.”
2. **“Gender** refers to the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person’s biological sex.”⁴
3. **Disorders of Sex Development** (“intersex” conditions): when a person’s biological sex from birth is not clearly male or female.
 - a. Various medical conditions (e.g. androgen insensitivity syndrome, congenital adrenal hyperplasia, discordant genitalia & sex chromosomes) result in abnormalities of the external genitals and/or a discord between genitals and sex chromosomes.

¹ See <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/How-Many-Adults-Identify-as-Transgender-in-the-United-States.pdf>

² <https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTS-Full-Report-Dec17.pdf>

³ John Pachankis and Richard Branstrom, “Reduction in Mental Health Treatment Utilization Among Transgender Individuals After Gender-Affirming Surgeries: A Total Population Study” available at <https://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1176/appi.ajp.2019.19010080>

⁴ American Psychological Association, *Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients*, adopted by the APA Council of Representatives, February 18-20, 2011. The Guidelines are available on the APA website at <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/guidelines.aspx>

- b. Abnormalities are present in approximately 1 in 4500 live births, though the nature and severity of abnormality varies widely.⁵
 - c. There is currently controversy within the medical community and among advocacy groups about when surgery should be performed on infants with DSD, when surgery is harmful, and when surgery should be delayed until the patient grows up and decides for themselves.
 - d. This phenomenon has been recognized since ancient times (older terms include “androgyne” or “hermaphrodite”).
4. **Gender Dysphoria (or gender incongruence):** when a person’s deeply felt gender identity does not correspond to their biological sex.
- a. “Strong, persistent feelings of identification with the opposite gender and discomfort with one’s own assigned sex that results in significant distress or impairment. People with gender dysphoria desire to live as members of the opposite sex and often dress and use mannerisms associated with the other gender. For instance, a person identified as a boy may feel and act like a girl.”⁶
 - b. Note: gender dysphoria is *not* the same thing as homosexuality or same sex attraction.
 - c. According to epidemiologists, up to 5% of kids *without* a DSD frequently or sometimes wish to be the opposite sex. For the vast majority of children who feel this way, these feelings resolve as they grow up into adulthood.⁷
 - d. The DSM-5 estimates that 0.005%-0.014% of adult males (1 in 7,000 to 1 in 20,000) and 0.002-0.003% of adult females (1 in 33,000 to 1 in 50,000) have gender dysphoria according to the DSM-5 definition. A larger number of people identify as transgender (or non-conforming, non-binary, queer, gender-fluid, etc.). The causes of gender dysphoria are debated and uncertain. (A prominent theory is this: for most people, the shape of their brain corresponds to their bodily sex, but for some, the shape of their brain does not correspond to their bodily sex, and that is why they identify as transgender. However, this theory is not proven, and others suggest alternative explanations.)⁸
 - e. In various cultures throughout history, there are occasional examples of people who were born as males but lived much of their life as females (and vice versa). In 1952, Christine Jorgensen became the first widely publicized person to have undergone sex reassignment surgery (in this case, male to female).

Biblical Framework

- **Creation:** Humanity as male & female reflecting God’s image
 - Genesis 1:27 “So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”
 - Male-female communion is an “echo” of the divine-human communion
- **Fall:** Disruption & distortion of all creation including gender and sex
 - For many of us who feel generally comfortable in our own male or female bodies, it is very hard to understand and empathize with someone who wishes that they were the opposite sex. However, because we live in a fallen world, the fact that some people experience disorders of sex development and/or gender dysphoria should not be a surprise to Christians. We live in a frustrating and broken world, all of us are alienated from who we were designed to be, and we await the final redemption of our bodies.
- **Redemption:** In the coming of Christ, we see God’s redemption, mercy, and healing being extended to all kinds of sinners and all kinds of brokenness

⁵ “Evaluation of the infant with ambiguous genitalia” from UpToDate.com.

⁶ *Psychology Today*, summarizing the definition from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition* (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/conditions/gender-dysphoria>)

⁷ “Evaluation of the infant with ambiguous genitalia” from UpToDate.com.

⁸ Mark Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 92. See ch. 3 for a helpful discussion of the main theories of causality and unanswered questions.

In light of the overarching biblical story, how should we understand and respond to people who experience gender dysphoria and/or who identify as transgender? Mark Yarhouse, a Christian psychologist, outlines three common frameworks for understanding gender dysphoria: the integrity framework, the disability framework, and the diversity framework. We will examine each of these in turn.⁹

1. **Integrity:** emphasizes the sacredness of humanity as created male and female. This view emphasizes *God's creational design*. This framework provides moral clarity based on God's design, and ethical motivation to align one's gender expression with one's bodily sex.
 - a. **Biblical support for this view:** in both Old and New Testaments, God instructs believers to preserve and reflect the ongoing goodness of the creation order, including male-female distinctions.
 - i. The *Old Testament* affirmed male-female distinctions and specifically prohibited cross-dressing and genital mutilation
 1. 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."
 - a. "It is likely that, in keeping with God's...concern to preserve the holiness of his character reflected within the covenant community of Israel...the cross-dressing prohibition was introduced to prevent involvement on the part of the Israelites in...Canaanite religious rituals of the day, which involved swapping of sex roles and cross-dressing." It is also likely "intended to signify a reaffirmation of divine intent, in that the distinctiveness between the two created sexes is to be maintained."¹⁰
 2. Deuteronomy 23:1 "No one whose testicles have been crushed or whose male organ has been cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord."
 - a. In the ancient world, men were occasionally castrated "because of a ritual of dedication to a god or because they had a special official position [i.e. that of a eunuch] in the king's service or because of deliberate mutilation."¹¹ God wanted such barbaric practices to have no place among the people of Israel.
 - ii. The *New Testament* reaffirms male-female distinctions, even as it speaks powerfully to the unity, equal value, and mutual interdependence of men and women in Christ
 1. "There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female...you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). All Christians share a common salvation and an eternal inheritance in Christ.
 2. Some people quote Galatians 3:28 in an attempt to argue that Christians can discard or transcend the "male-female binary." However, this is by no means Paul's intention in this verse.
 3. The New Testament de-emphasizes boundaries and distinctions based on race and class, but in several places it affirms the abiding goodness of humanity as male and female. For example, some of the Corinthian Christians seem to have assumed that being in Christ liberated them from all male-female distinctions. Paul corrects them in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, a passage that is notoriously difficult to interpret in some respects (does it refer to head coverings, hair styles, or an attitude of respect toward husbands?) but

⁹ Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, ch. 2.

¹⁰ Evangelical Alliance Policy Commission Report on *Transsexuality* (2000) quoted in Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, 32.

¹¹ Ajith Fernando, *Deuteronomy: Loving Obedience to a Loving God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 524.

however one interprets the details of the passage, Paul clearly believes that there is some abiding distinction between men and women that should somehow be recognized and honored in the church.

4. Other passages that affirm or assume the abiding goodness of male-female distinctions include: 1 Timothy 2:8-3:15, Ephesians 5:21-33, Colossians 3:18-19, 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12, and many others.
 5. Jesus himself reaffirmed God's creational design of human beings as male and female (Matthew 19:4-5).
2. **Disability:** sees gender dysphoria as analogous to other forms of impairment that are not voluntarily chosen (e.g. blindness, depression). This view emphasizes that we live in a *fallen world*. It emphasizes responding compassionately to people who experience gender dysphoria and seeking to alleviate the misery that they experience.
- a. **Biblical support for this view:** Throughout the Bible, and especially in the coming of Christ, we see God's compassion for people who experience all kinds of brokenness, including bodily damage due to birth defects or human acts.
 - i. Even though castrated eunuchs were excluded from the assembly of Israel, the prophet Isaiah promised future redemption for "eunuchs who *choose what pleases me* and *hold fast my covenant*." They would receive "in my house and within my walls...a name better than sons and daughters...an everlasting name that *shall not be cut off*" (Isaiah 56:4-5). However, this promise of redemption was only a future hope, and not yet a present reality, under the Old Covenant.
 - ii. In the same passage where Jesus affirmed God's creation of humanity as male and female (Matthew 19:4-5), he also referred to eunuchs (Matthew 19:11-12).
 1. In Jesus' Jewish culture, eunuchs were generally despised as unmanly, as pagans, as people to be avoided, because their bodies had been mutilated and obviously did not conform to God's creational design.¹²
 - a. Josephus (1st c. Jewish historian): "Let those that have made themselves eunuchs be had in detestation; avoid any conversation with them who have deprived themselves of their manhood, and of that fruit of generation which God has given to men for the increase of their kind."¹³
 - b. Later on, Claudius Mamertinus (4th c. Roman official) would describe eunuchs as "exiles from the society of the human race, belonging neither to one sex nor the other."¹⁴
 2. Many people today who have an intersexual condition, or who identify as transgender, have felt a deep and persistent sense of alienation and rejection. Their experience today may have some parallels to how a castrated eunuch might have felt in the time of Jesus.
 3. In this context, Jesus' words concerning eunuchs (Matthew 19:11-12) are perhaps surprising.
 - a. "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth." This certainly would include people born with an intersex condition, as well as other birth defects that make sexual intimacy or procreation impossible.
 - i. Though these conditions are exceedingly rare, is it not some comfort that the Lord himself acknowledges the reality and the pain of this unwanted and unchosen condition?

¹² Though the Greek word *εὐνοῦχος* primarily referred to men who had been castrated, the word was occasionally used to refer to men who were impotent, celibate, or otherwise not inclined to marry and procreate.

¹³ *Antiquities* 4:290.

¹⁴ Quoted in Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female and Intersex in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 80.

- b. “And there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men.”
 - Again, everyone in the ancient world knew that this happened sometimes, and in Jesus’ day, eunuchs were generally despised for this reason.
 - “And there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.”
 - The surprise is that Jesus points to the figure of the eunuch as an image of Christian discipleship. The eunuch was not just someone whose body was defective, or whose body had been mutilated, and who was therefore undesirable and excluded, without hope of redemption. The figure of the eunuch also embodied undivided devotion to the king. A eunuch’s condition, though tragic and regrettable, could be redeemed through Christ.
 - The Ethiopian eunuch was fully accepted into God’s family through the saving work of Christ (Acts 8:26-40). This is the glorious promise of the gospel, and it brought the eunuch great joy. The gospel promise extends to individuals with an intersex condition and to individuals with gender dysphoria. Whoever surrenders to Christ, belongs to Christ now and forever, and even our bodily defects and weaknesses, when we surrender them to Christ and seek to live in accordance with his design, can be redeemed and turned for God’s good and wise purposes.¹⁵
3. **Diversity:** increasingly, this is the dominant framework through which our society views gender dysphoria, and it is *an alternative (secular) narrative of redemption*. Being transgender is one among many beautiful and individual expressions of gender, and it is important to affirm people in *whatever their deeply felt gender identity may be*, in order to participate in their liberation from stigma, shame, and oppression. This includes: access to medical treatment covered by insurance (including counseling, hormones, and surgery if desired), the legal right to work at any job regardless of gender identity or expression, the ability to easily change the gender listed on IDs, and broad social affirmation and approval of a transgender self-concept.
 - a. **Biblical evaluation of this view:** in this view, the most sacred principle is *the autonomy of the individual* and of *whatever individuals most deeply feel about themselves*. This is sometimes called “expressive individualism” and it is a deeply entrenched view in American culture, even among American Christians.
 - i. Gabe Lyons and David Kinnaman conducted a study and found the following:
 1. 84% of Americans believe that “enjoying yourself is the highest goal of life.”
 2. 86% indicate that to enjoy yourself you must “pursue the things you desire most”
 3. 91% agree that “to find yourself, look within yourself.”
 4. For American Christians, the numbers were 66%, 72% and 76% respectively.
 - b. This framework is deeply unbiblical, not simply because it affirms non-biblical gender identities, but more fundamentally because it idolizes the individual and our internal self-concept as the source of our truest identity.
 - c. How can we fruitfully engage with the majority of people in our society who hold these assumptions (and, how can we examine ourselves to see if we have bought into these assumptions in one form or another, because many of us probably have bought into this framework more than we realize?)
 - i. Many people have embraced expressive individualism because they are reacting to negative experiences or perceptions of more traditional sources of identity. In

¹⁵ In a different context, C.S. Lewis wrote: “The disciples were not told why...the man was born blind (John 9:1-3): only...that the works of God should be made manifest in him. This suggests that in...every other tribulation, those works can be made manifest: i.e. that *every disability conceals a vocation, if only we can find it, which will ‘turn the necessity to glorious gain.’* ...Like all other tribulations, it must be offered to God and His guidance how to use it must be sought” (italics added; quoted in Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* [New York: HarperOne, 2009], 146-148).

traditional societies, people are often forced into roles they aren't suited for. And in many societies these roles can be oppressive and rigid, especially roles about gender and family. Many women (and a significant number of men as well) have been sexually abused by men who felt entitled to do so and who justified their actions. Other people point to other kinds of neglect, oppression, misunderstanding, etc. that they have experienced in their own families and communities.

1. Christians should share these concerns. Socially imposed roles can be oppressive and dehumanizing. Traditional sources of identity can fail to honor how God has made each particular person. The Bible does not say that society or family should ultimately determine our identity. It does affirm the value and dignity of individuals as God's image bearers.
- ii. But modern expressive individualism (the belief that our identity should come from deep within ourselves, independently of society, independently of what anyone else thinks, even independently of the structure of our own physical bodies) has its own problems
1. Deep within ourselves we find that our desires are *constantly competing*
 - a. I want to be healthy and in shape, and I want to eat lots of ice cream
 - b. I want to have integrity and character, and I want to get ahead
 - c. I want to be aggressive, and I want to be sensitive
 2. Deep within ourselves we find that our desires are *constantly changing*
 - a. Why do people constantly stress out about decisions? Because often, we don't know what we want! (Do I want a job where I can travel, or do I want to settle down and raise a family? Do I want to date somebody who is exciting and adventurous, or stable and constant?)
 3. How we prioritize our constantly competing and changing desires is *greatly influenced by our society*
 - a. Take the competing impulses toward aggression and sensitivity. One of my Viking ancestors would have learned to embrace his impulses toward aggression and resist his impulses toward sensitivity, while a young professional dude today would be told to embrace his sensitive side and go into therapy for anger management.
 - b. Currently, our social context is increasingly encouraging people to define their own gender and sexual identity based on how they feel internally, apart from any external guiding principles and even apart from the given structure of their physical body. This is evidenced by the abundance of new terminology for gender and sexual identity (Facebook offers at least 71 gender options plus a fill-in-the-blank option). But this can be deeply confusing and anxiety inducing, especially for adolescents.
 4. Deep within ourselves *we don't truly find ourselves*
 - a. One author wrote, "My sense of self comes from...myself? That can't be right." If I don't have a stable sense of who I am, but I'm looking within myself to find who I am, how will I ever succeed?
 - b. We live in the most anxious society of all time, because people don't know who they really are! If nobody else can give us our self-worth, then we must achieve our self-worth completely alone, and this is a crushing burden.
 - c. The idea that we should find our truest identity deep within ourselves, apart from what anyone else thinks about us, is an idea that we have internalized *from our own society*, not truly from ourselves.

- d. Christians should not embrace this framework, but we must recognize what attracts people to it: a genuine hunger for identity (who am I?), community (where do I belong?), and redemption (is there meaning to my suffering?). And we must speak to how Christ meets these deepest human needs, how we find our truest selves in being known and loved and guided by Christ, and in community with God's people.

How ought we to approach a Christian who has an intersex condition or who experiences gender dysphoria?

1. We should not withdraw from them, even if it is initially difficult to understand or empathize with their experience. These people are bearing difficult burdens and will need extra care and love from the body of Christ.
2. We should affirm the goodness of how God has made them as male or female, especially in ways that they can receive. We should resist stereotyping or rejecting individuals who do not fit common social expressions of masculinity and femininity, even as we encourage people to express their maleness or femaleness in healthy ways. In the case of individuals with a severe intersex condition (such as external genitals that do not match their internal chromosomes) we should mourn the ambiguity of their condition as a result of the fall.
3. We should care for the whole person, and not fixate only on their gender identity. For example, maybe they are dealing with anxiety or depression or isolation, as much or more than gender dysphoria.
4. What if a transgender-identifying individual comes to Christ? This will likely be a complicated process. "We commend and encourage those transsexual Christian people who have determined to restore their birth sex identity as a consequence of biblical conviction, and/or who have decided to resist gender reassignment surgery. We would seek to prayerfully support their reorientation through the grace of God. We further commend and encourage those transsexual Christian people who are willing, but do not yet feel able, to re-adopt their birth sex identity, but who nevertheless have committed themselves to chastity and celibacy. We affirm celibacy to be an honorable and fulfilling vocation for those whom God has not called to marriage."¹⁶ An example of someone who went through a transgender surgery, was initially excited about it but later regretted it, and ended up going back to his birth sex identity 8 years later, is Walt Heyer. If you google his name, you can find references to his website, books, and articles that he has written, including his autobiography, *A Transgender's Faith*.

Resources:

There are not as many biblical and thoughtful Christian resources out there on transgender as there are on homosexuality. If you google "transgender Christians" you will find almost exclusively websites that are arguing that Christians should now embrace and approve of transgender self-concepts. A thoughtful response to the biblical and theological arguments of pro-transgender Christians is the article "A Christian Case for Transgenderism?" by Andrew Walker (online at *The Gospel Coalition*).

Vaughan Roberts, *Transgender*. This is a short (60 pages or so) book. I highly recommend it for all Christians who are beginning to think through this issue, it is the best introduction out there.

Mark Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*. This book is insightful, well researched and compassionate, written by a Christian clinical psychologist with lots of experience in the field. However, it is more descriptive than prescriptive, and he avoids taking definite positions on certain questions. See also his article in *Christianity Today*, Jul/Aug 2015 (an excerpt from the book).

¹⁶ Evangelical Alliance Policy Commission Report on *Transsexuality* (2000) online at <http://www.eauk.org/church/resources/theological-articles/transsexuality-report.cfm>.

Andrew Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate*. This book is comprehensive and well written on the whole, although there are a couple of places where some have criticized it for being too closely tied to cultural expressions of masculinity or femininity.

Rachel Gilson has some articles on her blog (rachelgilson.com) including “How to Love our Transgender Neighbors”