

## **ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**

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### ***Caitlyn Jenner, Feminism and Sexual Confusion in American Culture***

The cover of the July issue of *Vanity Fair* displays Caitlyn Jenner (the new transgender identity of 1976 Olympic gold medalist Bruce Jenner). Caitlyn is the new “poster girl” of the transgender movement in western civilization. Setting aside the trauma, emotion and confusion that goes with transgenderism, consider this insightful observation from columnist Kathleen Parker: “. . . seeing Jenner all gussied up like some 1940s Vargas girl (part Madonna, part Kardashian?)—wearing long tresses and corset-inspired lingerie—seems a mockery of her new womanhood, as well as the human dignity her public outing purportedly is intended to inspire.” Even more biting is the observation of journalist and former professor, Elinor Burkett: “Caitlyn Jenner’s idea of a woman: a cleavage-boosting corset, sultry poses, thick mascara and the prospect of regular ‘girls nights’ of banter about hair and makeup.” The comments of both Parker and Burkett reflect the growing frustration 21<sup>st</sup> century feminism has with the transgender movement. Consider Burkett’s additional reflection: “But as the [transgender] movement becomes mainstream, it’s growing harder to avoid asking pointed questions about the frequent attacks by some trans leaders on women’s rights to define ourselves, our discourse and our bodies. After all, the trans movement isn’t simply echoing African-American, Chicanos, gays or women by demanding an end to the violence and discrimination, and to be treated with a full measure of respect. It’s demanding that women reconceptualize ourselves.” Burkett quotes from an interview with Dianne Sawyer, in which Jenner stated that “what he looked forward to most in his transition was the chance to wear nail polish, not for a furtive, fugitive instant, but until it chips off. I want that for Bruce, now Caitlyn, too. But I also want her to remember: Nail polish does not a woman make.” There is obvious tension between the transgender movement and modern feminism.

According to a recent article in *Time* magazine, the next dimension of the postmodern sexual revolution, indeed the next civil rights movement, is the transgender one. Kay Steinmetz, author of the *Time* article writes, “Transgender people—those who identify with a gender other than the sex they were ‘assigned at birth,’ to use the preferred phrase among trans activists—are emerging from the margins to fight for an equal place in society.” Steinmetz’s article is a valuable introduction to this aspect of the cultural revolution.

First, a summary of the salient points from the Steinmetz article:

- Trans people (the preferred reference for transgendered people) are significantly more likely to be impoverished, unemployed and suicidal than other Americans. Indeed, a staggering 41% have attempted suicide, compared with 1.6% of the general population.

- Modern psychiatry has struggled with how to view trans people. For many years the term transvestite was used as a label of a disorder that could be treated by a psychiatrist. A new label gradually was adopted—transsexualism. Psychiatrists labeled it as gender identity disorder and in 2013 that diagnosis was superseded by gender dysphoria. Jamison Green, president of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health, describes this condition as “discomfort with the gender a person is living in, a sensation that much of the population would never feel.” Steinmetz adds this clarification: “Understanding why someone would feel that way requires viewing sex and gender as two separate concepts—sex is biological, determined by a baby’s anatomy; gender is cultural, a set of behaviors learned through human interaction.”
- Trans people reject all labels, seeing gender as a spectrum rather than only two options—male and female. Transgender is often an umbrella term for all rejections of the norm, from cross-dressers to transsexuals. How this is impacting the broader culture is illustrated by Facebook, which recently broadened its options for gender beyond male and female with some 50 categories from which to choose.
- Many trans people choose to use hormones and puberty blockers that can result in beards on biological females and breasts on biological males. Some go so far as to get facial feminization surgery or speech therapy, training a tenor voice to sing alto. Steinmetz summarizes one study which states that about two-thirds seek some form of medical treatment, while one-third seek surgery.
- In a striking sentence, Steinmetz writes: “No matter their anatomy, transgender people want to live—and be identified—according to how they feel: to be able to dress and be treated like a woman or a man regardless of what their parents or delivering nurses may have assumed at birth.”
- Male-to-female transitions are thought to be more common than female-to-male.
- At women’s colleges, administrators are struggling with how to handle applications from trans women. An even larger question looms over the military, where perhaps as many as 15,000 transgender troops await the day when they can be open about their identity. Further, American culture is facing the significant challenge of changing official documents such as drivers’ licenses, birth certificates and passports. [Psychologist Mark Yarhouse cites data from the American Psychiatric Association estimating that the number of transsexual adults is as low as 0.005 to 0.014% of men and 0.002 to 0.003 % of women. “But these are likely underestimates, as they are based on the number of people who visit specialty clinics.”]

Given the above Steinmetz summary, how should we think biblically about this complicated issue? Because the transgender issue focuses on real people who have real struggles, this is a sensitive and very personal issue. However, I believe what follows accurately summarizes what the Bible teaches:

1. Maleness and femaleness are God's choice, determined at conception. But growing into one's masculinity or femininity and embracing it can be thwarted by cultural and family developments. It seems reasonable to conclude that gender identity is a developmental issue.
2. It is certainly true that God desires that every male grow to masculinity and every female to femininity. When that does not occur, the culture has developed labels such as transgendered and transsexual. Regardless of the labels, God sees each individual as of worth and value because they bear His image, but as broken individuals. As with every human being, the salvation offered in Jesus Christ heals the brokenness.
3. As with every individual human being, our fundamental identity is in Jesus Christ. Much of the postmodern world has focused on sex or gender as the primary aspect of personal identity. But the Bible calls on us to identify with Jesus—He is our core identity, regardless of whether we are male, female, transgender, etc. Identity in Christ is a profound, transformative concept that results from placing our faith in Christ.
4. It is certainly true that God intends for males to manifest masculine characteristics and females to manifest female characteristics. The fact that some people are born with evidence of mutations in sex-determining genes does not impact their value and worth to God. But the Bible is clear that men are to appear as men and women as women—see Deuteronomy 22:5.
5. Focus on the Family has published a helpful position paper on the Transgender movement. I quote several points from that paper:
  - We must remember that those who struggle with their gender identity have lived lives of great pain, confusion and rejection . . . We must humbly share [God's] love embodied in the Gospel, to lift them up in prayer and to allow the Holy Spirit to bring about conviction, healing and transformation.
  - We affirm the Christian view that to be human is to be holistically united as body and spirit. Often, transgender advocates hold to the pagan view that the body is a container that the spirit is poured into. As such, they erroneously conclude that God has mistakenly put an opposite-gendered spirit into the wrong body or that the body is not the real person—that only the spirit is real.
  - We call upon parents to take a positive role in their children's development by providing them with a strong, Christian example of what it means to be male and female.
  - We believe we are called to proclaim the truth and beauty of God's design and the redemption from sexual brokenness in our lives and culture can only come through Jesus Christ. Like everyone else, "transgendered" individuals are desperately in need of

God's truth and deserve to know the love and compassion of Christ as shown through His people.

Since we love the Lord and believe that His Creation Ordinance constructs the proper foundation for understanding gender, sexuality and marriage, how do we respond to the immense cultural confusion when it comes to human sexuality? (1) We must reaffirm the importance of the body. Both male and female bodies are of ultimate value and dignity to God; it is a dimension of being in His image (Gen. 1:26-27). Maleness and femaleness in marriage point us to an even deeper reality: the unity and complementarity of Christ and His church (Ephesians 5:32). (2) Words matter. God has chosen to reveal Himself verbally in a book called the Bible. God defines reality for us, not autonomous humans who seek to re-define reality on their terms. Humanity does not have the freedom or the authority to redefine marriage, sex, gender or love. (3) Perhaps most importantly, the answer to all this confusion is the new identity we can find "in Christ"—a critically important phrase used over 240 times in the New Testament. To be "in Christ" is at the heart of the gospel. Only in Jesus will humanity find the ultimate purpose, meaning and fulfillment of life. As humans, our primary identity is not sexual; it is the call to be part of the "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17.) To be in Christ is to resolve all the confusion, the struggles and ruinous dysfunction of this Postmodern, Post-Christian world. As disciples of Jesus, we have the answer to the unimaginable confusion the millennial generation is experiencing when it comes to human sexuality. That answer is the gospel.

May God, in His grace, empower the church to see transgendered people as it sees every human being: a broken sinner desperately in need of the salvation that Jesus offers. As with all human beings, only in Christ is there healing, wholeness and the promise of a resurrected body after which the struggle with brokenness and sin will end. In eternity there will be no struggle with identity or life's meaning. Both will be fulfilled in Christ.

See Kathleen Parker, *Omaha World Herald* (7 June 2015); Elinor Burkett in the *New York Times* (7 June 2015); Mark Yarhouse [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com) (8 June 2015); *Issues in Perspective* (26 July 2014); Katy Steinmetz, "America's Transition," *Time* (9 June 2014); Focus on the Family Position Paper on Transgenderism at [www.focusonthefamily.com](http://www.focusonthefamily.com); "What is a Biblical View of Transgendered People" at [www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org)