

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Gender Dysphoria and Teenage Vulnerability

Gender Dysphoria is generally explained as distress caused by a mismatch between felt and perceived gender identity—between the sex on the birth certificate and how one feels. The Williams Institute, a Los Angeles think-tank, estimates that 1.4 million Americans (0.06% of those aged 16-65) are transgender. According to *The Economist*, “young people say that gender matters less than it used to, which sits oddly with the spreading belief that gender dysphoria can be severe enough to justify the upheaval and risks of transitioning.” Furthermore, “gender identity” in 2017 has come to mean how people feel or present themselves, as distinct from biological sex or sexual orientation. “Growing numbers of young people describe themselves as ‘non-binary.’ Others say gender is a spectrum, or that they have no gender at all. Facebook offers users a list of over 70 gender identities, from ‘agender’ to ‘two-spirit,’ as well as the option to write in their own.” To say this situation is confusing is an understatement. What are some of the dimensions of this confusion?

- Even though small, the number of transgender adults is rising. More are changing their names, clothing and pronouns, “taking cross-sex hormones and seeking gender-reassignment surgery.” Their rights and their status in society have become the next front on the culture war in western civilization.
- What exacerbates the confusion is how the various positions on the political spectrum are reacting to the “trans-revolution.” For example, as *The Economist* reports, some feminists reject the claim that trans women (people registered male at birth who have made the transition to female identity) are indeed women, rather than men who “eschew stereotypically male behavior.” Thus, for some trans people, who are being “misgendered” as they are by such feminists, this is downright cruel. They retaliate calling such feminists “transphobes” and accused them of hate speech. A veritable war of words has developed between transgender activists and women they call TERFS (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) about who should be let into women-only spaces and sports competitions.
- This confusion is perhaps most keenly felt by children. They are caught in the crossfire. Increasing numbers are seeking help for gender dysphoria, and adults are deciding what should be done with them. “For gender-dysphoric children” the clock is ticking because puberty molds bodies in ways drugs and surgery cannot. For that reason, some clinics are offering to “buy time” with puberty-blockers, which suppress the action of sex hormones. However, there are side-effects with such drugs. This is also not a

satisfactory way to handle gender dysphoria because several small studies now show that without treatment a majority of children end up comfortable with their birth sex. Puberty blocking could therefore be harmful. As *The Economist* argues, “It is bad enough that doctors, parents and gender-dysphoric children must make high-stakes choices against time without good evidence about what will happen. Worse is that children’s plight is being used by adults as an opportunity for moral grandstanding. The child’s interests depend not on the feelings of transgender activists—nor on those of feminists—but on facts that still need to be established.”

- Attempts to make language more inclusive of trans people means that in some circles the very terms “man” and “woman” are falling out of use and being replaced with “people with prostates” and “people with vaginas.” The preferred language used to center on “LGBT”—Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered (Transsexual). “Queer” is sometimes added to LGBT, for those who are “Questioning” their sexual identity. An “A” is also being added to LGBT for “Asexual,” for those who find their sexuality ill-defined by the existing heterosexual or homosexual categories. An “I” is also being added to include “intersex individuals,” a small but growing number of people whose bodies are “born gender-ambiguous.” So, we now speak of the LGBTQIA coalition.

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 identity 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.

May God, in His grace, empower the church to see transgendered people as they are to see 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 *The Economist* (18 November 2017), pp. 16, 51-53; Katy Steinmetz, “America’s Transition,” *Time* (9 June 2014); Focus on the Family Position Paper on Transgenderism at www.focusonthefamily.com; “What Is a Biblical View of Transgendered People” at www.probe.org.