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A BIBLICAL CONVERSATION ABOUT TRANSGENDER IDENTITIES

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Introduction

The Aim of This Paper

This paper has a narrow aim: to understand what the Bible says about the categories of male and female as they relate to questions about transgender (and non-binary) identities. I've titled the paper a "Biblical Conversation" instead of a "Biblical View" for at least two reasons. First, modern questions related to transgender identities are very new and there has been relatively little interaction with the complexities of this discussion. (Although, of course, there is no shortage of dogmatic opinions littered across conversations on social media.) Since this conversation is so fresh, any thoughtful interpreter should humbly be open to the possibility that their current assumptions should be reconsidered (or corrected) in light of further studies and research.

Second, the transgender conversation involves the convergence of many different academic disciplines: Biblical and Theological Studies, Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman History, Psychology, Psychiatry, Gender Theory, and Biology (among others). While I have done my best to read and wrestle with many of the relevant works in these areas, I make no claim to be an expert in them all.

In light of these two realties, I will try to exercise great caution, and in some places tentativeness, in drawing conclusions from my observations of what the Bible says and doesn't say.

Indeed, this paper is focused on the Bible and theology. I will not go into detail about contemporary scientific or philosophical theories about transgender experiences, nor will I engage all the various pastoral case studies that come up in this discussion (though I do offer some brief reflections at the end). And, for the sake of concision—it's already a long paper!—I will not integrate personal stories into my exegesis nor focus on pastoral care, relational compassion, or the various ways in which the church has harmed transgender people. (Indeed, I believe it has.) This paper is therefore incomplete. It consists of raw exegesis and theological reflection. I'm only trying to fill one gap in the multilayered discussion; I want to explore a biblical view of female and male identities as these relate to other possible transgender or non-binary identities.

At the end of the paper, I will offer some general thoughts on a few salient pastoral/ethical questions facing Christian leaders, such as:

- Are there only two genders, male and female, or are there other options?
- Is it possible for someone's gender to be different from their biological sex?
- Is it morally permissible for a Christian to present themselves or identify as a gender different from their biological sex?
- Is it morally permissible for a Christian to pursue sex reassignment surgery or receive hormone replacement therapy in an attempt to align their biological sex with their gender identity?

Definitions

Before diving in to the Bible, let's review the meaning of some terms and phrases we'll use throughout.

- *Transgender* is an umbrella term for the various ways in which some people experience incongruence between their biological sex and their gender identity.[1] In layperson's terms, a transgender person often feels like they're trapped in the wrong body.
- *Gender dysphoria* is a fairly new term used by psychologists to describe the level of distress that often comes with the incongruence one might experience between their biological sex and their internal sense of who they are (e.g. their gender identity).
- *Intersex* is a term used to describe someone who is born with some atypical features in their sexual anatomy and/or sex chromosomes.
- *Non-binary gender identities* are identities other than male or female. These identities include *gender-queer, gender-fluid, pangender*, and *gender nonconforming*. These terms are used by people who don't identify as exclusively male or female, or who reject a gender binary altogether.
- *Sex* simply refers to one's biological sex, which is constituted by one's system of reproduction, chromosomes (men have a Y chromosome while women do not), genitalia, and endocrine systems (i.e. hormones) which effect secondary sex characteristics such as body hair, bone structure, and muscle density.[2]
- *Gender* used to be used synonymously with *sex*. Some people still use them synonymously today, but many people typically use gender to describe one (or all) of the following: (1) Your own internal sense of self, (2) how you express yourself (clothing, mannerisms, interests, etc.), or (3) cultural expectations for what it means to be a man or a woman. In this paper, I'll use the term gender in a way that resonates most with the latter two; in short: *"Sex* is a bodily, biological reality, and *gender* is how we give social expression to that reality."[3]

Let's look at what the Bible says about male and female identities.

What Does the Bible Say About Male and Female Identities?

As we explore what the Bible says about male and female, we'll focus on Genesis 1-2, a section widely recognized as the most crucial to the discussion. We'll then briefly look at other relevant passages and themes. Finally, we'll address some of the most persuasive biblical arguments for non-binary or transgender identities.

Genesis 1-2

Genesis 1-2 plays a critical role in constructing a Christian worldview, especially for understanding the most foundational aspects of human nature. Virtually all Old Testament scholars recognize this. For instance, Gordon Wenham says the "themes and motifs" of Genesis 1 "are so pervasive and its theology so fundamental to the biblical worldview" that the themes laid down here "become the presuppositions of the rest of the sacred story."[4] Phyllis Bird likewise says, "The Bible's first statement concerning humankind remains the normative statement that governs all others."[5] And Richard Davidson, in a magisterial work on sexuality in the Old Testament, writes, "the opening chapters of Scripture may be seen as of 'seminal character' and 'determinative' for a biblical view of sexuality." [6]

What these first chapters say about humanity is of fundamental importance. This certainly doesn't mean they tell us everything we need to know about humans. But it does mean that some fundamental aspects of humankind are revealed to us here. We can't stress this enough because it's becoming quite common for people to assume that Genesis 1-2 is a good start to a great story, but carries little ongoing relevance for a Christian understanding of human nature. With that in mind, let's look at Genesis 1:26-27:

> Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." God created mankind **in his own image**, **in the image of God** he created them; **male and female** he created them. (Gen. 1:26-27)[7]

Three details are given about humanity. First, we are made in God's image. Second, we are commanded to rule over creation and to procreate. And third, we are created as male and female.

Notice that the poetic structure of Genesis 1:27 correlates "male and female" with the previous references to "the image of God" and "his own image." That is, our sex differences are part of what it means to reflect God's image. God could have created a sexless humankind to reflect his image, but he chose to create humans as sexed beings: female and male.

Does this mean that God is a sexed being, male and female? Not necessarily. We know through further revelation that God is spirit and does not have a body (John 4:24), so we shouldn't make a one-to-one correlation between human sex difference and the identity of God. Still, we must

take seriously the linguistic connection between "male and female" and "the image of God" clearly stated in Genesis 1:27. Marc Cortez, a specialist in theological anthropology, says it well when he writes: "Although recognizing that God is not a sexually differentiated being as humans are, we can affirm that human sexuality mirrors something important about the divine nature."[8]

But what exactly is it about the divine nature that's communicated through "male and female?" I find the view of Karl Barth and others to be the most compelling; namely, that human sex difference displays both "otherness" and "sameness," and the drive toward relational bonding—something we also see in the triune God. "[I]n God," says Cortez, "we see the three persons who are both 'other' and 'same' eternally bonded in intimate community."[9] Males and females are relational creatures who are both "other" (sex difference) and "same" (human)—similar to our triune God.

It's hard to say whether this "otherness" and "sameness" is the primary way in which sex difference images God. I think it's probably the most compelling of the available suggestions. What we can say with relative certainty is this: "By emphasizing sex difference," the author of Genesis "communicates that embodiment in general, and sexed differences in particular, is a central characterization of human personhood."[10]

Embodied sex difference is highlighted again in Genesis 2, where on two occasions the author calls Eve a "suitable helper" (Gen. 2:18, 20). The word "suitable," *kenegdo*, is a rare Hebrew word that's actually a combination of two Hebrew words: *ki*, which means "as, alike, like"; and *neged*, which means something like "in front of" or "opposite from." The first word conveys similarity—Eve is a human like Adam—and the second one conveys *dissimilarity*—Eve is a female, unlike Adam.[11] In other words, *kenegdo* highlights Eve's equality and sex difference.

Eve's sex difference isn't only acknowledged; it's considered to be sacred. When Eve is created, the author uses a word that's often translated as "rib:"

> So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. (Gen. 2:21-22).

The word translated "rib" is the Hebrew word *sela*. Despite the familiarity of this translation, it's very unlikely that *sela* actually refers to a "rib." In fact, *sela* is used in more than forty other passages in the Old Testament and it *never means "rib."* In almost every other usage, *sela* refers to the side of a sacred piece of architecture like the tabernacle or the temple.[12] Adam's body, therefore, and now Eve's, is compared to a sacred piece of architecture that radiates God's presence in the world. Desecrating the body would be akin to desecrating the temple.

What's envisioned here in Genesis 2 is this: Adam and Eve, as embodied divine image bearers, are both sacred creatures and reflect God partly through their sex difference. Because Eve is formed from Adam's side, she too is a sacred, embodied, equal-to-Adam display of God's presence in the world. "Otherness" and "sameness" are both put on display.

In the next verse, Adam celebrates Eve's similarity (humanness), dissimilarity (femaleness), and sexed embodiment: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man" (Gen. 2:23). The same goodness infused into male and female in Genesis 1 is repeated here in Genesis 2. Then, the author makes a fundamental statement about marriage: *"That is why* a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh." This introductory phrase, *"That is why,"* is a significant link between sex difference and marriage. The connection between Genesis 2:23 (sex difference) and 2:24 (marriage) suggests that marriage is precisely the union between two sexually different persons.

The Bible's foundational passage about human nature explicitly highlights the fact that we are embodied sexual creatures (male and female), which is a necessary and beautiful part of our image-bearing status, something God deems "very good" (Gen. 1:31) and an essential part of what marriage *is*. There is nothing in Genesis 1-2 which suggests that there might be a sexed state of being other than male or female. This doesn't mean there *can't* be other ways of being human beyond male and female. Again, Genesis 1-2 provides us with a *foundational* picture of human nature, not an *exhaustive* one.

Male and Female in the Rest of the Bible

While Genesis 1 and 2 refer to humans as male and female, it's possible that these categories are only two options among others that simply aren't mentioned in Genesis. For instance, rivers and marshes aren't mentioned in Genesis 1-2 either, only land and sea. But who would deny that rivers and marshes exist? (We'll explore this question more thoroughly below.)

Here are two questions we want to address in this section. First, does the rest of Scripture reiterate that humans are male and female, or does Scripture expand upon Genesis' categorization of humans as male and female? Second, do we see any evidence that people's identity as male and female can be separated from their embodied sex? (In modern day terms, we're asking: can someone's *gender* be different from their *sex*?)

As we think through these questions, here are five observations to consider.

First, in Matthew 19:4-5, Jesus cites the "male and female" statement from Genesis 1:27 and correlates it with the marriage statement in Genesis 2:24:

> Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning "made them

male and female" (Gen. 1:27) and said "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24)?

What can we draw from Jesus' words? At the very least, it appears that Jesus sees God's original creation of humans as male and female as *normative* and not just relevant for the beginning of creation. God's creation of humans as male and female has ongoing relevance for Jesus.

We need to be careful, however, not to read into Jesus' statement more than he intended to say. He's assuming a rather simple point—taken for granted in Judaism at his time—that marriage is a union between male and female. We can deduce from his words that even if there are other sexes besides male or female, only males and females can get married (to each other).

Second, whenever Scripture mentions crossing gender boundaries, it speaks negatively. For instance:

- Deuteronomy 22:5 prohibits cross-dressing: "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 few interpretive difficulties surround this command. The most important one is whether this command applies to Christians, or whether it's only part of the old covenant law that's no longer applicable to Christians. For reasons stated in the endnote, I see more evidence in favor of this command carrying lasting relevance for followers of Jesus.[13]
- 1 Corinthians 6:9 uses the term *malakoi* ("soft, effeminate") to refer to the passive partner in male same-sex sexual activity. Most scholars recognize that the term primarily highlights men who act like (or were considered to act like) women. Behaving "like a woman" in sexual activity (as it was considered) was *one* aspect of crossing gender boundaries, but *malakoi* covers a broad range of what were considered feminine activities. The *malakoi* were, as I've argued elsewhere, "men who fundamentally confused gender distinctions." [14]
- Paul's discussion about the order of public worship in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is predicated on the assumption that the church consists of men and women, whose sex and gender distinctions reflect God's created order.[15] However, we should not read modern cultural stereotypes or expected gender roles about male and female into this chapter (e.g. women are more emotional than men; boys wear blue, girls wear pink). While 1 Corinthians 11 assumes *that* men and women are different and that such differences should be expressed and celebrated, Paul gives few specific guidelines on *how* they should express their difference other than certain culturally appropriate types of clothing.
- Romans 1:26-27 speaks negatively about same-sex sexual relationships and roots its language in God's creational design for humanity as sexually different persons (the same is less explicit but still apparent in Lev. 18:22). That is, a significant reason why same-sex sexual relations are wrong is because they confuse gender distinctions.[16]

We need to be careful not to assume that each one of these passages speak directly or definitively to modern questions about transgender identities

However, our original observation still stands: *whenever* Scripture mentions some sort of *cross-gender behavior* (i.e. men acting like, presenting as, or identifying as, women; and vice versa), it speaks negatively.

Third, a biblical view of the human body suggests that biological sex is integral to human identity. That is, to be human is to be embodied, and to be embodied is to be sexed (we'll address intersex conditions below). Our bodies are good—indeed, "very good" (Gen. 1:31) and sacred (Gen. 2:21-23). And our bodies are integral to our personhood. There is no "I" without a body; a disembodied "you" is not really you.

Biblical passages to support this widely accepted claim are too many to list. 1 Corinthians 6:13-20 is particularly clear, where Paul refers to the body (Greek: *soma*) eight times and correlates it with personhood. It's likely that the Corinthians held to a stark dualism between their spirits and their bodies. That is, they were influenced by the view of Plato and others who believed that the body was bad while the spirit (or soul) was good, and that one's body was not integral to one's personhood. Paul was probably confronting this view when he wrote: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies" (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Again, in Romans 12:1 he commands believers to *"offer your bodies* as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God." Just a few chapters earlier, Paul writes, *"offer yourselves to God"* (Rom. 6:13, 16). For Paul, "your bodies" and "yourselves" means the same thing.[17]

Some Christians haven't always emphasized this. In pop Christianity, for instance, we often hear people talk about the body as a shell that covers "the real you." But this attitude does not reflect a Judeo-Christian view of human nature. As virtually all biblical scholars recognize, the Bible considers the body to be a core aspect of who we are (as we already saw in Genesis 1-2). We don't just *have* bodies; we *are* bodies. Yes, we have immaterial aspects of our human nature. But these are viewed as *part of* our embodied existence, not something separate from it. We are not souls with bodies, but embodied souls.[18]

Our sexed bodies are sacred, and they are an essential part of the identity that God has assigned to us. The "real you" is the "embodied you."[19]

Fourth, it appears that sex difference is maintained after the resurrection.[20] I say "appears" because, while this has been the majority position in Christianity, some significant theologians like Origen and Gregory of Nyssa disagree, and there are a few passages that could be taken to suggest that the resurrection will nullify sex difference (Gal. 3:28 and Matt. 22:30). We'll deal with these passages below. For now, here are several reasons why it's much more likely that sex difference will be maintained in the resurrection:

(1) Not only is sex difference part of God's pre-fall creation (Gen. 1:27; 2:18-24), it's a central part of human personhood and integral to how we mirror God's image (as we saw above). Unless Scripture explicitly says that sex difference will be done away with in the resurrection, there's no theological reason why it would be and strong theological reasons why it would remain.

(2) While Jesus' sex is not explicitly mentioned in the resurrection, he's still referred to by male pronouns and there's no evidence that he's no longer male. Since Jesus was male before his

resurrection, and since the sexed body is an essential part of personhood, then we would expect such embodied personhood to remain in the resurrection.

(3) Jesus' resurrection is a model for our own resurrection. "When Christ appears," John says, "we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2). And Paul writes, "he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies" (Rom. 8:11). There's little evidence in Scripture that our "mortal bodies," which were created as male and female and declared "very good" by our Creator, will be sexless when they are raised.

(4) Paul's most detailed description of our resurrected bodies (1 Cor. 15:35-58) draws extensively on Genesis 1-2, affirming the goodness of our bodies.[21] Paul does talk about some differences between our earthly bodies and our future resurrection bodies. The difference, though, is not between sexed earthly bodies and sexless resurrected bodies, but between our corruptible earthly bodies and our incorruptible resurrected bodies (see especially 1 Cor. 15:50, 52-54).[22] The fact that our sexed bodies are essential to our embodied existence and our personhood (according to Gen 1-2) suggests that, unless otherwise stated, sex difference will be part of our resurrected state.

Cumulatively, these four points suggest that our sexed embodied existence will carry on into the new creation and be part of our eternal state. This bears ethical significance as we think about male and female embodied sex difference. If we were created male and female, and if this creation was deemed "very good," and if our future, glorified existence will be in a sexed body, then there's every reason to honor and celebrate our embodied sex *now*.

Summary

Based on my reading of Scripture thus far, it appears that God intends for humans to identify as male and female, and that one's sexed body is an essential part of this identity. It also appears that there are no other sex or gender identities mentioned in Scripture other than male or female (we'll address some pushbacks below) and I do not see any evidence in Scripture (or in a biblical worldview of human nature) that male and female identities can be discerned without reference to the body. The sexed body itself is essential to personhood and an integral means though which we reflect God's image, both in our pre-fall state and in our future resurrected existence. Scripture does not seem to allow for—and in a few places explicitly prohibits—identifying as a sex or gender that's different from your biological sex.

None of this means that the Bible supports narrow cultural expectations of what it means to be male or female. The Bible is quite generous when it comes to how males and females are to express the gender of their biological sex.

Cultural Stereotypes Versus Biblical Mandates

As we talk about gender, we need to be careful *not* to stuff modern expectations of gender into biblical categories of male and female. The fact is, most of our assumptions about masculinity and femininity come from culture and not the Bible.

The Bible never says, for instance, that men must be athletic, unemotional, and aggressive; nor does it say that women must love wearing pink and having babies. Think about it. Were Bezalel and Oholiab being manly men when God gifted them to make "artistic designs" and sew "finely worked garments" (Exod. 31:1-10)? Or were they only masculine when they were "cutting stones" and "carving wood" (Exod. 31:4-5)? Was David being a man when he was killing Goliath, or when he was playing his harp and writing poetry while his brothers were off at war? Was Deborah being feminine when she led Israel to war (Judg. 4)? Was Jael living out her womanhood when she drove the tent peg through Sisera's head (Judg. 4)? And how about that Proverbs 31 woman? Is she being feminine when she "considers a field and buys it" (31:16) or only when she "provides food for her family" (31:15)? Was Jesus being masculine when he cried over Jerusalem and said he wanted to gather his people as a mother hen gathers her chicks (Matt. 23:37)? Or was he only being manly when he turned over the tables in the temple (Matt. 21:12-17)?

One of the most well-known and often taught passages about biblical femininity is in Titus 2:3-5, which reads:

> [T]each the older women to be **reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers** or **addicted to much wine,** but to **teach what is good**. Then they can urge the younger women to **love their husbands and children**, **to be self-controlled** and **pure**, to be busy at home, **to be kind**, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.

If you look closely, you'll see that of the 10 commands given to women, 8 of them (the ones in **bold**) equally apply to men, while only 2 (the ones underlined) might be female-specific. (The command to "love their husbands" equally applies to husbands who are elsewhere commanded to "love their wives;" e.g. Eph. 5:22-25).

My point is this: while men and women are called to live out their human identity as men and women, there's little *biblical* specificity on what exactly this looks like. A harp-playing, poetry-writing man like King David is living out his male identity just as much as a football player who can bench 300 pounds. *Both* are called to be godly whatever their cultural interests or hobbies might be.

In short, the Bible acknowledges that humans are male and female and expects humans to live in congruence with their embodied sexed identity. However, the Bible gives few specific guidelines about what this will look like. God's expectations for gender expression are quite flexible. Most modern assumptions and stereotypes about what it means to be a man or woman are not endorsed by the Bible.

Arguments Affirming Transgender or Non-binary Identities

Several counter-arguments have been offered against much of what I've said so far in this paper. In no particular order, I'll summarize and then respond to each of these arguments.

Genesis 1 assumes non-binary aspects of creation

The first argument says that Genesis 1 appears to refer to binaries, but these "apparent" binaries are in fact only polar ends of a spectrum that allows for hybrids and many variations in between.[23] For instance, Genesis 1 talks about day and night as polar opposites—like male and female—but there's also dusk and dawn, which are in between day and night. Genesis 1 talks about land and sea creatures, but we can also assume that frogs and other amphibians—creatures of both land and sea (or water)— were part of God's good creation. Therefore, when Genesis 1 talks about "male and female," these are simply the opposite ends of a spectrum of identities, and the text allows for the possibility of variations in between male and female, intersex and transgender being the most obvious examples.

It's true that some statements like "day and night," "land and sea," or "alpha and omega" bear the sense of "these two opposites and everything in between." But each pair of terms needs to considered on its own merits. We shouldn't assume, for instance, that since "land and sea" includes rivers and marshes (neither land nor sea), the same must therefore be true of "male and female." We need to find biblical evidence for humans that exist as neither male nor female.

Plus, a quick scan of the Bible shows that rivers and marshes (Exod. 7:19; Ezek. 47:11), dusk and dawn (Gen. 15:17; Deut. 16:6), and frogs and other amphibians (Exod. 8:2; Lev. 11:30) are mentioned as part of creation—Genesis 1 certainly doesn't cover every asteroid and amphibian in the universe. But *whenever* humanity is mentioned in Scripture, they are always referred to as male or female.[24] We simply don't encounter humans who are identified as something other than male or female in Scripture. (We'll address eunuchs and intersex persons below.) Therefore, while Genesis 1 certainly assumes various hybrids or shades of "in-betweenness" in many aspects of creation, and while Genesis 1 *by itself* could assume the same about humanity, the rest of the Scriptural witness about creation never acknowledges another kind of sexed human other than male or female.

One could say that God was not aware of the various other kinds of sexed humans that are neither male nor female, and therefore Scripture never mentions them. But this seems to diminish God's awareness of his own creation. One could otherwise say that God *was* aware of other kinds of sexed humans but didn't consider it necessary to mention them. But this would suggest that God was indifferent toward non-binary people. Neither of these possibilities seems particularly compelling.

Here's another way to honor Scripture *and* the complexity of human experience—one that I find to be most convincing. There are variations in humanity like eunuchs, intersex persons, and people with gender dysphoria, who might fall

outside the *cultural expectations* of what it means to be male or female. But they are still considered by God to be male or female. And some intersex persons might experience a blend of male and female sexed bodies, but this doesn't constitute a third or other sex, but a blend of the two (more on this below).

Put differently, there are many variations in *how* humans are male and female, but this doesn't mean there are many variations *in addition to* male and female.

Jesus' acceptance of the eunuch affirms non-binary gender identities

At the tail end of a conversation about marriage and divorce, Jesus makes a statement about three different kinds of eunuchs:

> For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it. (Matt. 19:12)

The kinds of eunuchs are: (1) those who were *born* eunuchs, (2) those who were *made* eunuchs by others, and (3) those who *choose* to live like eunuchs.

According to the context, Jesus' main reason for bringing up the eunuch is to highlight and celebrate the vocation of singleness. Notice that it's the disciples' statement, "it is better not to marry!" (19:10), which triggers Jesus' eunuch statement in 19:12. Eunuchs were single largely because they couldn't have children (see below). As such, eunuchs were also considered outcasts due to their inability to marry and produce offspring—the *raison d'etre* of Jewish manhood.

Now, some people argue that Jesus' positive statement about eunuchs affirms transgender or non-binary gender identities. Linda Herzer, for instance, says that "along with the genders of male and female, Jesus also recognized that there actually *is* gender variance."[25] Austen Hartke believes that Jesus' "teaching about eunuchs" applies to those who feel "the call to a life outside the gender and sex norms of their time," which includes transgender Christians.[26] While I very much appreciate the concern to include the marginalized and to create space for people who don't match up to rigid gender stereotypes, I think these arguments overextend the Bible when they employ Jesus' words to affirm transgender or non-binary identities. To better understand (and apply) Jesus' point, we have to look at who eunuchs were in the ancient world.

The Greek term *eunouchos* (and its Hebrew and Latin equivalents) is used in Jewish and Greco-Roman literature to cover a broad range of individuals.[27] Some were considered asexual,[28] and therefore they served as reliable guardians of the king's harem (or daughters)[29] or as focused military leaders unhindered by sexual distractions.[30] Others were viewed as feminized men who lacked secondary male sex characteristics (facial hair, deep voice, etc.), typically because they had been castrated before puberty. Still others were viewed as sexually charged men who were infertile but not impotent—capable of sexually servicing wealthy women (and, in some cases, their husbands as well) without the risk of pregnancy.[31] In some cases, eunuchs were considered neither masculine

enough to be real men nor feminine enough to be real women, even though this accusation stems from cultural stereotypes projected upon eunuchs and not from some psychological condition of the eunuch themselves.[32]

Across these different kinds of eunuchs, the common denominator among them all is that they were biological males[33] who were *infertile*, most often as a result of some impairment in their sexual anatomy from birth or through castration.[34] As far as I can tell from the literature, eunuchs were never considered to be masculine *women*. By and large, eunuchs were referred to as men who weren't very manly because they didn't have testicles or were infertile. (If they weren't considered to be males, then why would it be shocking that some *didn't* have testicles?) The very accusation of eunuchs being less *manly* assumes that there was something about them that *should have* been manly. Any ambiguity over who eunuchs were had to do primarily with gender expectations based on cultural stereotypes and not biological sex.

To summarize, what we know about the eunuchs Jesus mentions is that they are models of singleness, a vocation that Jesus holds in high esteem, that they are infertile and probably born with damaged or abnormal genitalia or castrated, and that they are probably socially scorned by some for failing to measure up to cultural stereotypes of what it meant to be men. It is possible, of course, that these eunuchs also experience what we now call gender dysphoria, though it's impossible to say. It's also possible that when Jesus spoke of eunuchs, he was thinking of people who believe they are a gender different from their biological sex, but again, there's no evidence for this. And even if we did make this latter assumption—an assumption without evidence—we would still have to argue that Jesus himself *endorsed* this ontological claim. But there's no evidence for this either. Indeed, we would have to take Jesus out of this first-century Jewish context in order to employ him to make the claim that a biological female might actually be a man (or vice versa).

Given the context of Matthew 19 and a wider knowledge of eunuchs in the ancient world, what we can say with confidence is this: *due to eunuchs' infertility, most likely through castration or birth defects, they were likely to remain single for life, since the expectation of child-bearing was part and parcel of marriage in first century Judaism.*[35]

Perhaps some eunuchs would be closer to people who we now call intersex: people born with atypical features in their sexual anatomy, chromosomes, or secondary sex characteristics. Understanding intersex persons through the lens of Jesus' first eunuch—the one born that way— makes more sense to me, though we need to be clear about the meaning of intersex. Ninety-nine percent of intersex conditions present little to no ambiguity about whether the person is male or female, so neither the eunuchs nor intersex persons are synonymous with some sort of third or other sex. "Intersex" doesn't necessarily mean "neither male nor female" (more on this below).

Furthermore, while castrated, or infertile, men (i.e. eunuchs) were scorned for not being real men, this has to do more with cultural stereotypes about masculinity and femininity that were projected upon eunuchs. (Similarly, men with small penises who shaved their chest hair were also considered not to be real men.) I find it unlikely that Jesus himself would play into these stereotypes and consider eunuchs to be a third or other sex based on the fact that they were castrated or born with damaged testicles. At the very least, there's nothing in the context of Matthew 19 which suggests that Jesus mentions eunuchs in order to validate a third sex beyond male and female.

Neither male and female—Galatians 3:28

At the conclusion of a lengthy argument about God's mission to include Gentiles, Paul writes:

> There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, **nor is there male and female,** for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28)

Some people quote this verse (the part about "nor is there male and female") to show that Paul downplayed sex difference and was seeking to move beyond the created order of Genesis 1-2. Some even say that Paul anticipates that in the resurrection, sex difference will be done away with altogether. In the resurrection, we will live forever *not* as males or females, but as androgynous, non-sexed people.

This interpretation is growing in popularity, and it's not without evidence. The phrase "male *and* female" probably refers back to Genesis 1:27, where God created humanity as "male *and* female." Notice that Paul says, "*nor is there* male and female" (ESV), which raises the question: what is it about Genesis 1:27 that Paul seems to overturn? One scholar writes, "once it is recognized that Galatians 3:28c is a citation of Genesis 1:27c the implication is that Paul… envisions that the creation ordinance which differentiates and separates humanity on the basis of sex has been negated in Christ."[36] Also, there was a popular myth in Paul's time that humanity originally existed as an androgynous human and was only later split into two different sexes, male and female. Perhaps Paul had this myth in mind when he penned Galatians 3:28. In resurrection, we will return to our original, pristine, androgynous state. [37]

This interpretation doesn't come right out and affirm transgender and non-binary gender identities, but it does pave the way. If Galatians 3:28 downplays sex difference in the new creation, then those who are dipping their toes in the new creation *now* (e.g. Gal 6:16) don't need to maintain such differences. Non-binary identities would therefore live in the shadow of our future resurrection.

Despite some evidence for this interpretation (especially the allusion to Gen. 1:27), I find it problematic for at least two reasons. First, there's nothing in the context of Galatians 3:28, nor in the letter as a whole, nor even in any of Paul's thirteen letters, where Paul says that sex difference is no longer important. We would be hard pressed, in fact, to find any other reference to sex differences being a bad thing, or an old thing done away with in Christ, in the entire New Testament. (We'll address below the statement in Matt. 22 about believers being like the angels of heaven.) It's unlikely that Paul would randomly drop a bomb here in passing—one that's contradictory to his own statements about male and female—without further comment. It would serve no purpose in his argument in Galatians 3, which is about deconstructing social hierarchies and not about sex difference.

Second, any persuasive interpretation of "male and female" must be correlated with the other two pairs in Paul's statement: "neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free" (Gal 3:28). If sex differences are being done away with, then we'd almost have to conclude that the other differences—Jew and Gentile, slave and free—are also erased. But the fact is, Jews are still Jews, Gentiles are still Gentiles, slaves are (unfortunately) still slaves, and free people are very much free. Paul's entire argument in Galatians 3 is that Gentiles can become Christians *as Gentiles*; they don't need to become Jews in

order to be saved. Paul is challenging hierarchies based on ethnic differences, not ethnic differences themselves.

With regard to Jew/Gentile and slave/free, therefore, it's clear that Paul is saying that these ethnic and socioeconomic statuses do not diminish your salvation status. "For you are *all* one in Christ Jesus," Paul says in his next breath (Gal 3:28), which is the climactic point in Paul's argument. Most likely, then, Paul is using the male/female pair in the same way he's using slave/free and Jew/Gentile. Paul is boldly declaring that women (who were usually treated very poorly in the first century) are given equal status in God's kingdom—a beautiful statement that only makes sense if there really are women and men.

Now, there are two points we still need to address: first, the allusion to Genesis 1:27, and second, Jesus' nullification of marriage in Matthew 22.

Even if there's no evidence in Galatians that Paul is doing away with sex difference, we still have to make sense of his negative allusion to Genesis 1:27.[38] The phrase "*nor* is there male and female" seems to imply "nor is there Genesis 1:27"—the source of the "male and female" phrase. So what is it about Genesis 1:27 that Paul is seeking to overturn or improve upon?

One option, as we've seen, is to argue that Paul envisions a new creation where sex differences will be no more. Not just inequalities based on those sex differences, but sex differences themselves. We've already seen a couple rather large interpretive hurdles that this view must leap over. So let's set this interpretation aside for a moment to see if there is another more compelling way to understand the text.

One interpretation has gained a lot of support from a wide variety of scholars. It looks at how Genesis 1:27 was interpreted by Paul's contemporaries, rather than just at the meaning of Genesis 1:27 in its original context. Sometimes verses take on an interpretive life of their own through cultural usage. Think about how John 3:16 has taken on a life of its own in American football stadiums as evangelistic sports fans hold up signs with "John 3:16" written on them for all to see.

When we look at Paul's wider culture, we see some evidence that the phrase "male and female" was used as a catchphrase that denoted marriage. For instance, one Jewish text condemned polygamy by appealing to what the author called "the principle of creation" which "is 'male and female he created them'"—a quote from Genesis 1:27.[39] In this context, "male and female" stands in for (monogamous) marriage. Jesus himself quotes Genesis 1:27 and even tethers it to Genesis 2:24 (the famous "leave and cleave" marriage passage) in a context that's all about marriage. Plus, the specific construction Paul uses, "male *and* female," treats the two words as a collective unit, a structure different from the other two contrasting pairs Paul mentions in the same verse: *"neither* Jew *nor* Gentile, *neither* slave *nor* free."

It's quite possible, then, that Paul's short reference to "male and female" is not intended to throw shade on Genesis 1:27, nor to do away with sex differences altogether. Rather, Paul might be saying that *women don't need to get married to be valuable in the kingdom.* This makes sense of how Genesis 1:27 was understood in Paul's day as a statement about marriage, and it also fits in perfectly with what Paul is arguing for in Galatians 3. He's leveling the playing field of people considered to be socially unequal—slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles, male and female. In Paul's day, women were often

considered to be valuable *as long as they were married and had lots of children*. Infertile women, especially widows or divorced women, were considered less valuable. But not in God's kingdom! Paul challenged such social hierarchical structures. "For we are all"—married or unmarried, fertile or infertile—"one in Christ" (Gal 3:28).

I wouldn't take a bullet for this interpretation. It does assume that Paul has this wider cultural understanding of Genesis 1:27 in mind, which is precisely that—an assumption. But it is an informed assumption, one that makes sense of both Paul's culture and his argument in Galatians 3. Plus, several scholars both liberal and more conservative see this reading as the best way to understand what Paul is saying.[40] From my vantage point, the other interpretive options (for example, that sex differences will be done away with in the new creation) are far less compelling than this one in light of Paul's argument in Galatians.

This brings us to Matthew 22:30, which is often mentioned alongside Galatians 3:28:

> At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.

Luke's version of this statement contains some additional words:

> But those who are considered worthy to share in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage. In fact, they can no longer die, because they are like the angels. (Luke 20:35-36)

Some read this and conclude that Jesus is saying that we'll be resurrected as sexless, androgynous beings. But I find several problems with this interpretation.

First, nowhere does Jesus say we'll be sexless in the resurrection. He only says we'll "neither marry nor be given in marriage." Obviously, people can still be male or female even if they never marry. While marriage assumes sex difference, sex difference still exists apart from marriage. Plus, as we've shown above, there's evidence elsewhere in Scripture that our resurrection bodies will reflect our earthly (sexed) bodies.

Second, the reference to being "like the angels" doesn't necessarily mean we'll be sexless in the resurrection. Whenever angels appear in the Bible, they always appear as male. When Jesus' audience heard that we'll be "like the angels," they'd have no reason to think "sexless." And while angels may not be married, this doesn't demand that they are sexless. Even if they were sexless, the point in comparing us to angels is that we won't be married, or, as emphasized in Luke's gospel, that we will never die. It's certainly not clear that when Jesus says "like the angels," he means "sexless."

It's unlikely, then, that Jesus promotes the erasure of sex difference in the resurrection.

The Bible isn't able to authoritatively address modern questions about transgender identities.

People who use this argument might agree that the Bible only talks about humans as male and female. However, they argue, that's because its writers weren't aware of all the things we now know about gender dysphoria, transgender identity, and non-binary identities.

While it's true that we now know much more about sex and gender than the biblical writers, there is actually quite a bit of continuity between our world and theirs. The biblical world was filled with well-known and very public figures who were biologically male yet expressed their gender as females (or vice versa). For instance, we know that in ancient Mesopotamia there were cult functionaries known as the *assinnu*, *kurgarrû*, and *kulu'u* who blurred gender distinctions. They were "men…by birth as regards their physiology, but their appearance either was feminine or had both male and female characteristics." Their appearance corresponded to the god(dess) of their worship, Ishtar, who was known for "transgressing conventional gender boundaries."[41] Fast-forward two millennia, and we see similar cult functionaries in Phrygia known as *galli*, who served the goddesses Atargatis and Cybele. *Galli* were castrated men who dressed up as women and basically took on a feminine role in society. [42]

But crossing gender boundaries was not limited to cultic practices. We see evidence in popular literature of stories that resemble to some extent modern transgender experiences. Writing just prior to the birth of Christ, Ovid tells a tale about a biological girl, Iphis, who was raised as a boy by her mother.[43] (Somehow, the mother kept the secret from her husband, who desperately wanted a boy.) As she grew older, Iphis found herself sexually attracted to Ianthe, a female—and her future bride. Iphis finds her same-sex attraction to be unnatural and therefore prays that the gods would transform her into a boy—a wish that is granted just prior to her wedding: "until this very moment, you *were* a female, and now you're a boy."[44]

As far as we can tell, the Roman emperor Elagabalus (reign: A.D. 218-222) wanted to be, or believed he was, a woman. The Roman author Dio Cassius tells us that Elagabalus had sex with women so that he could learn how to act like a woman in bed. He would go to the taverns and dress up as a barmaid and pick up men. He would also work the brothels and service men *as a woman*. When he got married to Hierocles, a male Carian slave, Elagabalus dressed up as a bride and gave himself away as a "wife." He continued to live out his identity as a woman. [45]

Other examples could be explored,[46] but suffice it to say, it is likely that the biblical authors were aware of biological males identifying as, expressing themselves as, or longing to be females (or vice versa). While we shouldn't flippantly map modern-day experiences and questions directly onto the biblical material, we also shouldn't assume that their context was completely different than ours. A quick look at the biblical world shows that there are some relevant parallels to our current conversation about transgender identities.

What about intersex?

The fact that some people are born intersex is often used to show that male and female aren't the only options. As the argument goes, *since we know intersex persons exist, and they are neither male nor female, therefore male and female aren't the only two sex or gender options.* While this isn't technically a Bible argument, it's significant enough to address, since intersex persons clearly exist—both now and also in biblical times.

There are at least three questions related to intersex persons that are relevant for our conversation. First, do intersex people constitute a third or "other" sex? Second, do intersex persons show that male and female aren't the only two options for biological sex? Third, does the existence of intersex persons

validate the ontological claims of transgender people?

Do intersex people constitute a third or "other" sex? Responses to this question are often rooted in how common intersex is and which people are rightly considered intersex. Some say that 2 in every 100 people are intersex, while others say 1 in 10,000 or higher. It all depends on who is classified as intersex.

Biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling is well-known for saying that 1.7% of all human births are intersex (about the same as people born with red hair), and many people have reiterated this statistic.[47] Unfortunately, her methodology is a bit misleading.[48] In defining intersex (and arriving at her 1.7%), she includes various conditions where there's little to no difficulty in identifying the person as male or female. For instance, Fausto-Sterling includes the following conditions:

- *Late Onset Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia* (LOCAH)—1.5 in every 100 births.[49]
- *Klinefelter Syndrome*—1 in every 1,000 births.[50]
- *Turner Syndrome*—1 in every 2,700 births.[51]
- *Vaginal Agenesis*—1 in every 6,000 births.[52]

None of these conditions make it difficult to recognize the biological sex of the person, yet they constitute an overwhelming majority (about 99%) of conditions typically classified as intersex. Conditions that exhibit genuine ambiguity in biological sex are very rare. These include:

- Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH)—1 in 13,000 births.[53]
- Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (CAIS)—1 in 13,000 births.[54]
- Partial Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (PAIS)—1 in 131,000 births.[55]
- Ovotestes (also called true hermaphroditism)—1 in 80,000 births.[56]

Every human born into this world bears God's image in unique and beautiful ways. We can't highlight the rarity of some types of conditions in a way that could "other" certain people. But it's misleading to reference the broad umbrella category of intersex conditions (almost all of which present little to no ambiguity in one's biological sex) and use this to argue that intersex people (1.7% of the population) are neither male or female.

But what about the 1% of intersex persons, those with CAH, CAIS, or other conditions where there's significant ambiguity in biological sex? Are they a third or other sex? I find it more helpful to say that such persons—beautiful persons created in God's image and are worthy of respect, value, and admiration—are a blend of the two biological sexes rather than a third sex completely different from male or female. It may sound like I'm splitting hairs, but I think it's more than semantics. When the Bible talks about humans as sexed creatures, it recognizes two categories. Theologically, it makes sense to say that through the Fall, some people are born with a blend of male and female sex characteristics. If we believe that the Fall has the potential to touch every aspect of human nature, then what would it look like for the Fall to touch our sexual anatomy or sex chromosomes? I suggest that it would look like intersex conditions.[57]

In short, I do not think intersex persons constitute a third or other biological sex.

Do intersex persons show that male and female aren't the only two options for biological sex? Again, we need to be clear about what we mean by intersex persons. If we're talking about the 99% of intersex conditions that present little to no ambiguity in determining biological sex, then I don't think it's helpful to say that intersex, as a general category, shows that male and female aren't the only two options. In the case of the 1%, as stated above, I think it's more accurate and helpful to say that they constitute a blend of male and female, rather than a sex completely different from male and female.

Does the existence of intersex persons validate the ontological claims of transgender people? By "ontological claims," I'm referring to the claim that someone could have an unambiguously male or female body and yet actually be, ontologically, a gender different from their male or female body. In this case, I do not think that intersex conditions can be neatly mapped onto transgender identities. In the former, we're dealing with an objective, bodily reality that is for the most part immutable. In the latter, we're dealing with a subjective, psychological reality that is for the most part fluid. (That is, one's internal sense of self isn't fixed from birth to death; more often than not, it changes.) This doesn't mean the latter is wrong or right. It just means it's different. Some intersex people are born with abnormalities in their biological sex, or in some very rare cases, significant blurring between their chromosomal and anatomical sex. This is quite different from someone who is unambiguously a biological male, yet thinks and feels that they are a female.

I think it's better, and more honoring, to think about intersex persons and transgender-identified persons on their own terms, rather than using one to furnish ethical or ontological claims about the other. Therefore, I do not think that the existence of intersex persons necessarily validates the ontological claims of transgender persons.

Pastoral Reflections

I want to reiterate again—this paper is incomplete. It's not intended to be read as a one-stop resource to understand everything we need to know about transgender identities and experiences. It serves only to lay a biblical foundation about male and female gender identities as they relate to transgender experiences. However, I do want to at least provide some general talking points and tentative responses to some some of the most salient pastoral questions related to our conversation. A more thorough response to these questions would require much more research in the area of biblical ethics, psychology, and biology, salted with a heavy handful of pastoral and relational experience.

Are there only two genders, male and female, or are there other options?

Notice that this question uses the term "gender" and not "sex." Hopefully after having read this paper, you will now ask: *What do you mean by "gender"?* Biological sex is a different category than gender. Sex is determined by a person's sexual anatomy, reproductive organs, endocrine systems, and chromosomes, while *gender* is often used to refer to several different things, such as: one's internal sense of self, how people express themselves, and/or cultural expectations for how men and women should behave.

Having said that, the Bible itself doesn't separate sex from gender. That is, it uses "male" and "female" to cover both aspects (biological and cultural/psychological) of the human experience.

In terms of (what we now call) gender, the Bible provides us with generous guidelines. Sex difference is upheld and celebrated, while cultural stereotypes of gender expression are resisted and sometimes confronted. Again, we shouldn't force everyone into narrow gender stereotypes that come from culture and not the Bible. But the different ways in which God encourages us to live out our gender are considered *part of* and not *additions to* the sex categories of male and female.

In short, I suggest that the Bible recognizes two sexes and yet provides a good deal of flexibility in what it means to experience and express your male or female identity, which would mean that there are two sexes and two (somewhat flexible) genders.

Can someone be a gender different from their biological sex?

Again, this question runs into the problem of defining gender. If someone believes that gender means "my internal sense of self," then they will probably believe there are many different genders—one to match the myriad of different ways humans might see themselves. Put simply, if you believe gender is simply "my internal sense of self" regardless of your biological sex, then one could theoretically be a gender that doesn't match their biological sex.

But this understanding of gender is questionable at best. At the very least, it assumes that one's "internal sense of self" is a reliable guide for

determining an ontological reality. That puts an awful lot of confidence in something as fragile and unreliable as one's mental self-perception—especially when such subjective self-perception is at odds with one's objective biological sex.

I said at the beginning of this paper that *"sex* is a bodily, biological reality, and *gender* is how we give social expression to that reality."[58] In other words, gender is the social expression of your biological sex. Therefore, gender should be understood *within*, not *in addition to*, the two biological sexes of male and female.

Assuming this latter explanation of gender, and given my observations thus far about male and female identities in Scripture, I do not believe that someone can ontologically be a gender different from their biological sex. They can think, feel, and live like they are a gender different from what their biology says they are. But this doesn't mean they *are* (ontologically) a gender different from their biological sex. The Bible does not view gender as something completely separate from one's biological sex. The two are interrelated. People can experience incongruence between their gender and their biological sex, but this doesn't mean that their sense of gender is correct. The ultimate question is not *who do I see myself as* but *who does God see me as*, and if my understanding of Scripture is correct, then our bodies play a significant role in determining our identity, since we are sexually embodied creatures.

Is it morally permissible for a Christian to present themselves or identify as a gender different from their biological sex?

I do not see a compelling scriptural argument for identifying as, or presenting as, a gender different from your biological sex. However, we need to qualify this statement in at least two ways.

First, the Bible allows for a broad range of gender expressions within a sexual binary. This doesn't mean there are many different genders in addition to male and female, but it does mean that there are many different ways of being male or female. It's possible, for instance, that a biological female could act in ways that appear to be masculine in the eyes of others, but this does not necessarily mean that she's presenting as a male—though some might accuse her of such. Our focus should be on the heart, by asking questions like these: *Who does God identify me as? And what's my motivation in expressing my gender in the particular ways that I do? Do I believe I embody a gender that goes against how God sees me? Am I trying to present or pass as a different sex?* These are the types of questions we should ask ourselves.

Second, gender expression differs from culture to culture, and from time period to time period. A hundred years ago, boys wore pink and girls wore blue. Today, the opposite is expected (not demanded, of course!). In some Polynesian cultures, it's common for men to wear skirt-like attire (called lavalavas), though in most Western countries, only women are expected to wear skirts. Gender expression is intrinsically connected to culture, and cultural expectations differ from one time period to another and from one culture to another. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to rubber stamp cultural forms of gender expression with an absolute moral imperative.

Therefore, yes, God intends that males identify as

males, and females as females. But what this may look like isn't so black and white.

Is it morally permissible for a Christian to pursue sex reassignment surgery or receive hormone replacement therapy in an attempt to align their biological sex with their gender identity?

This question is difficult to answer without interacting with biological and psychological contributions to the discussion. For instance, I earlier defined sex as "one's biological sex, which is determined by a person's sexual anatomy, reproductive organs, endocrine systems, and chromosomes." This is admittedly a biological claim, not just a biblical observation. Likewise, when I defined gender and talked about the difference between sex and gender, I drew upon recent psychological (and sociological) studies. I would encourage readers to engage broader scientific discussions about sex reassignment surgery and hormone replacement therapy (or SRS/HRT) as they interact with the moral question I raised above. (A good place to start would be *The Center's* pastoral paper "A Christian Survey of Sex Reassignment Surgery and Hormone Therapy" by Drs. Mark Yarhouse and Julia Sadusky, available for free at: centerforfaith.com/resources)

Based on my biblical observations in this paper, I would argue that it is never God's intention that someone would try to change their biological sex. (Fully changing biological sex is currently impossible, since chromosomes are a significant part of determining sex and we currently cannot change our chromosomes.) Those who argue otherwise typically assume that a person's internal sense of self is more accurate than their biological sex in determining whether someone is male, female, or non-binary. I do not agree with this assumption, however, and I have yet to find a compelling biblical argument to support it.

Other Christians who might support SRS/HRT in some cases are largely influenced by deep pastoral compassion and a lack of alternative treatments for severe gender dysphoria. When someone is suffering from debilitating gender dysphoria, and nothing else has worked to alleviate such dysphoria, some people believe that SRS/HRT is the best option in helping the person with dysphoria cope with life. As much as my heart bleeds for someone suffering from such a severe condition—and some of my friends do suffer from gender dysphoria—I find it problematic to argue along these lines for SRS/HRT. Long-term follow-up with people who have pursued SRS/HRT has shown that it's not a guaranteed solution in treating gender dysphoria and can lead to other mental and physical problems (see the Yarhouse and Sadusky paper mentioned above). Plus, alleviating suffering can never be the sole reason for moral choices. I say this with the utmost sensitivity to those who are suffering from this condition. Again, this is not an abstract issue for me; this "issue" is my friends—who are not mere issues. But sound, Christ-like, wise moral decisions cannot be reduced to questions like, "What would alleviate suffering the most?" Rather, we should ask, "How can we best reflect Christ in our lives?" And the latter might *involve* suffering, for those with or without gender dysphoria.

Still others might argue that a person's brain could be a different gender than their otherwise biological sex. That is, if a biological female has a male brain, then who's to say that their brain must always be aligned with their body? Why not align their body with their brain? This argument sounds

pretty compelling, but there at least two things to consider. One, biological sex is determined by systems of reproduction, sexual anatomy, chromosomes, and endocrine systems. Brains have never been a means of determining a person's sex. Two, the science behind whether there is such a thing as a "male brain" and a "female brain" is sketchy at best.[59] From a purely scientific perspective, much more research needs to be done before we could legitimately make the claim that, for instance, an otherwise biological male might have a female brain.

In the case of some intersex persons whose biological sex is genuinely ambiguous, it makes sense to pursue surgical intervention to align their bodies with the gender they identify with—if they so choose it. (I'm on the side of intersex activists who protest surgical intervention against the person's will; intersex persons should be free to wait until they are old enough to make the decision whether they even want such surgery.) But in the case of people who identify as transgender, whose biological sex is unambiguous and who have healthy bodies that don't need to be altered, I don't see any moral reason why they should attempt to change their biological sex. We should at least hold out the possibility that their internal sense of self might be wrong, while their body is right. In this case, I would suggest that the path most faithful to the way of Christ would be for the person to try to align their internal sense of self with their body, not the other way around. In no way do I want to downplay the severity of gender dysphoria that some transgender-identified people experience. Some people with severe dysphoria may battle it for their entire lives. There is no quick and easy solution. (The same could be said of other biological or psychological conditions.) But it seems to be a misdiagnosis to assume that a perfectly healthy body, with no ambiguity in biological sex traits, is what needs to be corrected.

Notes

1. According to Christian psychologist Mark Yarhouse, *transgender* is "an umbrella term for the many ways in which people might experience and/or present and express (or live out) their gender identities differently from people whose sense of gender identity is congruent with their biological sex" (*Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015], 20).

2. I'm aware that the term "biological sex" is disputed in some circles, as is "birth sex" or even "sex." In some cases, the dispute has to do with the cultural assumptions and expectations that come with being a "boy" or a "girl," so that the declaration "it's a boy!" is inevitably tethered to a cultural meaning and expectations of what the boy should become—a rough and tumble, gun-loving, truck-playing, sports-loving *boy*. Thus, the preferred phrase in some circles is "sex assigned at birth" to highlight some degree of human agency in foisting boyhood or girlhood upon the child by assigning to them a culturally loaded category of "boy" or "girl." It would seem, though, that most of these concerns have to do with *gender* and not *sex*. Or, they are focused on some types of intersex conditions, where the sex of the person is difficult to determine, for instance if someone is born with XY chromosomes and female genitalia. In these cases, the phrase "sex assigned at birth" *is* relevant, since a human agent is determining (not simply recognizing) whether the person is male or female. In this paper, when I refer to biological sex, I'm simply referring to the chromosomes, reproductive systems, gonads, and external genitalia of non-intersex persons without *implying that such persons must live up to cultural expectations of masculinity or femininity.* I've included a separate section at the end of the paper addressing questions related to intersex persons.

3. Ryan T. Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment* (New York: Encounter Books, 2018), 149. Under this definition, while sex and gender capture different aspects of being male or female, this doesn't mean that there are other genders (or sexes) in addition to male or female, but it does highlight the fact that there are different ways of being male and female. Certainly, there are different ways to express and experience our gender, our maleness or femaleness, but this doesn't in itself mean that there are different genders. Hillary Lips (who *literally* wrote the textbook on sex and gender—currently in its 6th edition) uses the term gender in a very similar way as I do, as an "inclusive term when discussing female-male differences that may be caused by any combination of environment and biology" and also "as a label for the system of expectations held by societies with respect to feminine and masculine roles" (*Sex & Gender: An Introduction* [6th ed.; New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008], 6).

4. *Genesis 1-15* (Word Biblical Commentary; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 39.

5. "Bone of my Bone and Flesh of My Flesh," *Theology Today* (1994): 525, 527, cited in Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 4.

6. *Flame of Yahweh*, 5.

7. All translations are from the NIV unless otherwise stated.

8. Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 66.

9 Ibid., 67.

10. Nate Collins, *All But Invisible: Exploring Identity Questions at the Intersection of Faith, Gender & Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 208.

11. Austen Hartke says that *kenegdo* "essentially means 'of the same type'" and that Adam and Eve "share a special connection as the only two of their kind" (*Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2018], 63). His suggested definition

"of the same type" lacks evidence. Certainly, this conveys the meaning of *ki*—the first part of *kenegdo*—but it doesn't make sense of *neged*, the second part. While Hartke rightly highlights the similarity between Adam and Eve (they are both human), he misses the dissimilarity between the two—the sex difference between male and female.

12. See John H. Walton: *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 77-81.

13. Some people dispute the NIV's translation of *keli geber* as "men's clothing," since *geber* often means warrior and, they say, *keli* never means clothing. Some therefore say that the command prohibits woman from dressing up in a warrior's armor and therefore might not have much to do with cross-dressing *per se* (see Linda Herzer, *The Bible and the Transgender Experience: How Scripture Supports Gender Variance* [Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2016], 34-37). This interpretation is problematic for several reasons. First, while the adjective *gibbor* most often means "warrior, Deut. 22:5 uses the noun *geber*, which often overlaps with the normal word for man, *ish* (see e.g. Exod. 10:7, 11; 12:37). Second, the word *keli* doesn't typically refer to clothing, but it does refer more generally to various things associated with men, including certain ornaments, weapons, hunting equipment, gear, and also clothing (1 Sam. 21:6; 1 Kings 10:21; Gen. 24:53; Numb. 19:18). The translation "the things of men" is probably a better and more inclusive translation of the phrase by itself. However, the parallel statement, "nor a man wear women's *clothing" (shimlat)* specifies an article of clothing, which suggests that the former reference to *keli geber* probably does have clothing in mind. In any case, the point made here goes much deeper than mere clothing, to the fundamental difference between men and women. Clothing is the external expression of those differences. In most cultures of every era, clothing carries powerful signs of class, style, modesty, status, and—especially—of sex difference. According to two experts on the history of cross-dressing: "Dress traditionally has been a ubiquitous symbol of sexual differences, emphasizing social conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Cross dressing, therefore, represents a symbolic incursion into territory that crosses gender boundaries" (Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993], viii, cited in Nili Sacher Fox, "Gender Transformation and Transgression: Contextualizing the Prohibition of Cross-Dressing in Deuteronomy 22:5," in *Mishneh Todah: Studies in Deuteronomy and Its Cultural Environment in Honor of Jeffrey H. Tigay* [ed. by Nili Sacher Fox, David A. Glatt-Gilad, and Michael J. Williams; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009], 51). In short, "the prohibition of the wearing of clothes of members of the opposite sex was…to safeguard the division between male and female" and was rooted in God's concern for diversity and order as reflected in the creation account of Genesis 1-2 (P. J. Harland, "Menswear and Womenswear: A Study of Deuteronomy 22:5," *ExpTimes 110* [1998]: 76).

Determining whether this command still applies today is particularly difficult, however. There's little in the surrounding context that helps us determine its lasting relevance. The verses before (vv. 1-4) talk about straying oxen and the verses after (vv. 6-8) talk about taking care of birds in their nests. The next set of verses (vv. 9-11) talk about mixing seeds, animals, and fabrics, which could be correlated with the concerns about mixing gender in v. 5. The near context doesn't give us much help in determining modern applications of this verse.

Some people say that the prohibition is probably limited to cultic activity (Herzer, *Transgender Experience*, 37). But there's nothing in the near context of Deuteronomy that seems particularly concerned with cultic practices, and the generic terms *geber* ("man") and *ishah* ("woman") would be an odd choice if cultic practices were meant. It seems rather hasty, therefore, to punt to some cultic context of the command, since this isn't stated and can't just be assumed.

In terms of New Testament usage, while the prohibition isn't explicitly cited, we do see similar concerns about clothing and male/female difference in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. We also see Paul prohibiting same-sex sexual relations in light of his concerns about gender confusion (in particular, Rom. 1:26-27 and 1 Cor. 6:9, as stated above). This suggests that while we shouldn't just thoughtlessly cite Deuteronomy 22:5 as if it self-evidently applies to the church, we can say that the driving principle of the

command very much resonates with how the rest of Scripture celebrates maintaining differences between the sexes.

14. Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 106.

15. On the creational background of 1 Cor. 11, see Judith M. Gundry-Volf, "Gender and Creation in 1 Corinthians 11,2-16: A Study of Paul's Theological Method," in *Evangelium—Schriftauslegung—Kirche: Festschrift für Peter Stuhlmacher zum 65. Geburstag* (ed. O. Hofius et al.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1997), 151-171.

16. Classicist Kyle Harper makes the same point and shows that Paul was truly unique among other Greco-Roman writers by making same-sex sexual behavior about male-female differences rather than power differentials, age-differences, or exploitation: "The very language of 'males' and 'females' stood apart from the prevailing idiom of 'men' and 'boys', 'women' and 'slaves'. By reducing the sex act down to the most basic constituents of male and female, Paul was able to redescribe the sexual culture surrounding him in transformative terms" (Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013], 95, cf. 96-99.

17. See for instance James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 55-61.

18. For a brief theological overview of this point, see Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 70.

19. This point is driven home from a different angle by trauma specialist Bessel van der Kolk in his groundbreaking book *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Penguin Books: New York, 2014).

20. See Beth Felker Jones, "Embodied from Creation Through Redemption: Placing Gender and Sexuality in Theological Context," in *Beauty, Order, and Mystery: A Christian Vision of Human Sexuality* (ed. Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson; Grand Rapids: IVP, 2017), 21-30.

21. For example, the reference to "heavenly bodies" and "earthly bodies" (1 Cor. 15:40) alludes to Gen. 1:14-18; 1 Cor. 15:45 quotes from Gen. 2:7; the reference to sun, moon, and stars (1 Cor. 15:41) draws on Gen. 1:16; the seed-bearing plants after their kind (1 Cor. 15:36-38) draws upon Gen. 1:11-12; the reference to birds, animals, and fish (1 Cor. 15:36-38) finds resonance in Gen. 1:20-22. See N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 341.

22. For a thorough study of 1 Cor. 15:35-49, see ibid., 340-361.

23. The first time I considered this argument was in a conversation with Roy Ciampa back in 2015. It's now become a rather popular argument to show that the Bible approves of transgender or non-binary identities. See, for instance, Lewis Reay, "Towards a Transgender Theology: Que(e)rying the Eunuchs," in Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (eds.), *Trans/Formations* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 148-67 (152-53); Megan DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 177; and, most recently and thoroughly, Hartke, *Transforming*, 47-58.

24. The phrase "male and female" is used only a few times in the Old Testament: in Genesis 1:27 (cf. Matt. 19:4; Gal. 3:28) and 5:2, in reference to the creation of humans as male and female; and in Genesis 6:19; 7:3, 9, 16, referring to animals going into the ark "two by two."

25. Herzer, *Transgender Experience*, 47.

26. Hartke, *Transforming*, 108.

27. The word is only used in two passages in the New Testament (Matt. 19:12 and Acts 8:27 ff.). In the LXX, *eunouchos* translates the Hebrew term *saris* 31 times.

28. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 7.60-65; Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 75.14.

29. Esther 1:10, 12, 15; 2:3, 14, 21; 4:4-5; 6:14; 7:8; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 76.14.4-5.

30. 2 Kings 25:19; Jer. 39:3, 13.

31. Juvenal, *Satire* 6.366-378; Martial, *Epigram* 3.81; 4.67; 6.2, 21, 39, 67; 10.91; 11.81; Hieronymus, *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.47; Tertullian, *Ad Uxorem* 2.8.4; Claudian, *In Eutropium* 1.105-109.

32. See, for instance, Lucian of Samosata, *The Eunuch*: "a eunuch was neither man nor woman but something composite, a hybrid, and monstrous, alien to human nature" (cf. Claudian, *In Eutropium* 1.468; see Hester, "Postgender Jesus," 20). The eunuch in question is one that had his penis cut off. Lucian's perspective seems to reflect his phallocentric view of maleness—men have penises, and the bigger they are, the more manly one is. Similarly, Augustine said that a castrated eunuch was "a man" who "is so mutilated that he is neither changed into a woman nor remains a man." (*City of God*, 7.24). Notice that Augustine said it was a "man" who had been mutilated. When one considers a mutilated man no longer a man, this reflects cultural assumptions about manhood. These perspectives seem to assume rigid, cultural stereotypes of what it means to be a man or a woman—a problem today just as much as it was back then.

33. Of course, external genitalia is *part* of the evidence used to determine whether someone is male or female and eunuchs often were castrated; therefore, at least part of the evidence for their biological sex was, to be frank, no longer apparent. A person's biological sex, though, can't be reduced to whether they have testicles or not, any more than a person's humanness can be determined by whether they have two legs or not—even though humans, categorically, are two-legged mammals. In any case, some ancient writers spoke of eunuchs as neither male nor female because they had their "manhood" cut off (see the previous note).

34. Isa. 56:3-5; Wis. 3:13-14; implied in Philo, *Joseph*, 153.

35. This is especially true if Matt. 19:12 alludes to the eunuch prophecy in Isa. 56, which clearly highlights infertility: "let not the eunuch say, 'Behold, I am a dry tree'...I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off" (56:4-5).

36. Wayne Litke, "Beyond Creation: Galatians 3:28, Genesis and the Hermaphrodite Myth," *Studies in Religion 24* (1995): 173-178 (178).

37. For this creation myth, see Plato's *Symposium* 189D-193D. For early interpretations of Gal. 3:28 along these lines, see *Gospel of Thomas* 22; 2 Clement 12:2-6; *Gospel of Philip* 70; cf. the *Gospel of the Egyptians* as quoted by Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3, 13.92-93. The first scholar I can find who connects Gal. 3:28 with this myth of an androgynous original human is Wayne Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," *Harvard Theological Review* 13 (1974): 165-208. For one of many critiques of this view, see Judith Gundry-Volf, "Christ and Gender: A Study of Difference and Equality in Gal 3,28," in *Jesus Christus als die Mitte der Schrift: Studien zur Hermeneutik des Evangeliums* (eds. Christof Landmesser, Hans-Joachim Eckstein, and Hermann Lichtenberger; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 439-477.

38. The phrase *arsen kai thelu* is exactly the same as the Greek translation (LXX) of Gen. 1:27. In the Old Testament, it's only used elsewhere of humans in Gen. 5:2 and then of all animals in Gen. 6:19-20; 7:2, 3, 9, 16.

39. *Damascus Document* 4:20-5:2.

40. For instance, Ben Witherington, "Rite and Rights for Women - Galatians 3:28," *NTS* 27 (1981): 595-96; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 211; Judith M. Gundry-Volf, "Male and Female in Creation and New Creation: Interpretations of Galatians 3:28c in 1 Corinthians 7," in *To Tell the Mystery: Essays on New Testament Eschatology* (ed. Thomas E. Schmidt et al.; JSNTSup 100; Sheffield: JSOT, 1994). Also, my friend Bruce Hansen spends a portion of his Ph.D. dissertation unpacking Galatians 3:28 and comes to the same conclusion; see his "'All of You Are One': The Social Vision of Gal 3:28, 1 Cor 12:13, and Col 3:11," (Ph.D. diss. University of St. Andrews, 2007).

41. Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 30.

42. "Because of their emasculation they would never return to the past but had to live the rest of their lives in a permanently changed social and gender role;" Ibid., 32.

43. *Metamorphoses* 9.669-797. Ovid's story, of course, is a fictional tale. But ancient fiction often mirrored and made sense of real life experiences (see Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 10, 16, 193, 236).

44. Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, 9.791-792.

45. Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 80.13.1-17.1; cf. Aelius Lampridius, *SHA Elagabalus* 8.6-7, 10.5-7, 11.7-12.2.

46. For other comments about cross-gender behavior, see e.g. Martial 7.67, though it's difficult to know whether writers and poets like Martial thought that all lesbians simply wanted to be men.

47. Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). Her statistic of 1.7%—approximately the number of people born with red hair—is repeated by many, including *USA Today* (https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/ 2017/01/23/what-does-mean-intersex/96939238/) and the *Washington Post* (http://www.washingtonpost.com /sf/style/2017/10/05/the-intersex-rights-movement-is-ready-for-its-moment/?utm_term=.40a877302716).

48. See the critique by Leonard Sax, "How Common Is Intersex?" *Journal of Sex Research* (2002).

49. Characteristics: Normal genitalia and chromosomes; XY babies have male genitalia, XX babies have female genitalia. The most common symptom in men is a thinning scalp, which appears in 50% of men with this condition. Some women (about 10%) with LOCAH have a larger clitoris than women without this condition. Infertility in both men and women with LOCAH is another possible symptom. For the breakdown of how common each condition is and for a description of each, see http://www.isna.org/faq/frequency, Sax ("How Common"), and Fausto-Sterling (*Sexing*).

50. Characteristics: XXY chromosomes. Males have normal genitalia, though their testicles are typically small. They can achieve and erection and ejaculate, though most men with Klinefelter's are infertile. Fertile men typically go completely undetected.

51. Characteristics: Females missing an X chromosome; typically infertile; possible heart problems and diabetes.

52. Characteristics: Females have XX chromosomes and no ambiguity in their biological sex, though the distant third of the vagina fails to develop. According to Leonard Sax: "Surgical correction for vaginal agenesis is conceptually no different from surgical correction for cleft palate" ("How Common Is Intersex?").

53. Characteristics: A defect in an enzyme leads to an excessive production of androgens in genetic (XX) females, which produces either male genitalia or genitalia that appear somewhere in between male and female.

54. Characteristics: Genetic males (XY) are born with a defect in the androgen receptor and therefore the cells don't respond to testosterone. Though genetically male, the person typically has female external genitalia, though no uterus and ovaries.

55. Characteristics: Similar to CAIS, people with PAIS typically have some atypical features in their sexual anatomy. Some may exhibit underdeveloped male and female sexual anatomy, while other less severe cases may be males with a very small penis and infertility.

56. Characteristics: As it sounds, people with ovotestes are born with both ovarian and testicular tissue.

57. Even scholars and medical professionals, who don't believe in "the Fall," use language to describe intersex conditions which suggests that something went wrong in fetal development, which leads to a newborn who might be ambiguously sexed. Hillary Lips, for instance, is a world renown expert in theories surrounding sex and gender,

describes CAH as a "genetically transmitted syndrome" that "causes the adrenal glands of the fetus to *malfunction*, resulting in a release of *excess androgens* from the prenatal period onward" (Lips, *Sex & Gender*, 192). Lips describes AIS as "a genetically transmitted *disorder* that makes their cells *partially or completely unable to respond* to their high prenatal levels of androgens" (Ibid., 196). Suzzane Kessler believes that the existence of intersex persons challenges the male/female sex binary, and she describes CAH as an "*inherited enzyme deficiency condition*, causing a *malfunction* of the fetus's adrenal gland, which results in the *overproduction* of fetal androgen" (Kessler, *Lessons from the Intersexed* [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998], 165-66, cited in DeFranza, *Sex Difference*, 30) And Christian theologian, Megan DeFranza, who also believes that male and female aren't the only two sexes, says that "people with AIS are *unable to process* male hormones" and "their cells *lack the proper receptors*" (*Sex Difference*, 25).

58. Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally*, 149.

59. See, for instance, the thorough discussion in Rebecca Jordan-Young, *Brainstorm: The Flaws in the Science of Sex Differences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

About the Author

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