

Transgender, Non-Binary, and Intersex

Big Idea: Understand complicated issues around sexuality, and respond with biblical conviction and a willingness to walk with people.

We're in the middle of a tough series on sexuality and gender, and I want to warn you up front: this is going to be perhaps the most difficult message in the series. It's good to acknowledge that up front. We're going to talk about transgender, non-binary, and intersex issues and people. This is a very complicated topic, and I am a learner. I don't want to speak beyond my level of knowledge, and I want to approach this topic as carefully and accurately as I can.

So a few notes as we begin.

- This is a complicated topic. I've already said this, but I want to repeat it again.
- We're not just talking about an issue; we're talking about people. Because it's about both people and an issue, and so we must aim to be both biblical on the issue and loving to people. We don't want to just focus on activists and deconstruct their ideology. We must think accurately and biblically, but take care not to destroy people in the process.
- We need God's help. So let's pray right now for that. Father, we ask that as we look at these topics that you would lead us into both grace and truth. Thank you for your help so far in this difficult series. And we pray once

again for your help today. May we love well, and may this sermon be marked by your wisdom and your compassion. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Defining Terms

The first thing we want to do today is to define terms. We can't really talk about these issues if we don't know what we're talking about.

So let's look at some important terms:

- **Sex and gender** – These terms used to be interchangeable, but increasingly they're not. For the sake of clarity we'll talk about sex as biological sex: the physical and biological dimensions of being male and female, including the sexual anatomy, chromosomes, and secondary sex characteristics. We'll talk about gender as "the psychological, social and cultural aspects of being male or female," and gender identity as "how you experience yourself (or think of yourself) as male or female, including how masculine or feminine a person feels" (Mark Yarhouse, [Understanding Gender Dysphoria](#)).
- **Transgender** is an umbrella term for the various ways in which some people experience incongruence between their biological sex and their gender identity. Gender dysphoria is related: it's "the feeling that their biological body is lying. A person in this situation really thinks that he or she is, should be, or would feel better as, the gender that is opposite to their biological sex, or no gender at all." ([God and the Transgender Debate](#))

- **Transsexual** is someone who has pursued or is pursuing medical treatment – a sex change or hormone therapy – to align their biological sex and their gender identity, or is thinking of doing so – although this is a bit of an out-dated term.
- **Intersex** is used to describe someone who is born with atypical characteristics in their sexual anatomy and/or chromosomes. In 99% of cases of intersex people, there is little to no ambiguity about the biological sex of the person, but in 1% of cases there is significant ambiguity about the biological sex.
- **Non-binary** – which includes terms like gender queer, gender fluid, pan gender, gender non-conforming – refers to people who don't like to be put in a box, who see male-female as a spectrum and argue that they are somewhere in the middle. It's a social term more than a medical one.

Can you see how complicated all of this is? Here's the number one thing we need to understand: transgender people are not all the same. As someone has said, "If you have met one transgender person you have met one transgender person. No two experiences are the same."

Really there seem to be, broadly speaking, four kinds of stories we may encounter:

- Some people are gender dysphoric. This can range from mild to severe. They feel that their sense of gender is at odds with their biological sexual anatomy. It causes them stress and anxiety.
- Some don't fit masculine/feminine stereotypes. They don't meet cultural expectations of what it means to be male or female.

- Others are autogynephiliac. This one is controversial. It's about males who are sexually aroused by the thought of themselves as a female. According to a [study](#) at the University of Lethbridge, it's a form of "erotic target identity inversions" in which men desire to impersonate or turn their bodies into facsimiles of the persons or things to which they are sexually attracted. Some transgender activists become really upset at this label, but it does exist, but can't be used to label all kinds of transgender people.
- And then there are trans-trending, or what some call rapid onset gender dysphoria (ROGD). It describes people who identify as trans and maybe even experience some gender dysphoria, but it comes from mostly social pressures. As someone has said, "Trans is trendy." One doctor who runs a gender clinic says that only a small number of those who come to him would be identified as having gender dysphoria. For instance, a teen can come out as trans seemingly out of nowhere, sometimes as a result of peer and social pressures.

To get some ideas of the numbers that we're talking about:

- 0.005% - 0.014% experience gender dysphoria, according to the DSM 5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders).
- Approximately 1 in 10,000 males and 1 in 30,000 females experience gender dysphoria, according to a [2016 study](#) published in the Annual Review of Clinical Psychology.
- 0.6% identify as transgender. In other words, many people identify as transgender but don't experience gender dysphoria.
- And then it's really interesting to look at how age affects this. 12% of Millennials identify as transgender or gender non-conforming. 27% of Californian

youth (13-18 years old) identify as gender non-conforming, or neither completely male or female. 50% of Millennials believed that gender is not binary (male and female) but exists on a spectrum.

So there are a variety of experiences. We need to understand the diversity.

Today we will focus on gender dysphoria and intersex, although you'll see the implications for other areas.

When it comes to gender dysphoria, the experience of sensing a disconnect between biological sex and their gender identity, we need to understand something important. Mark Yarhouse, professor of Psychology at Regent University in Virginia Beach, [writes](#):

The person is navigating gender identity concerns. These concerns are real and often quite confusing and isolating. The person worries about who would believe them, what people would think about them, and so forth. This is tremendously isolating and often associated with other concerns, such as depression and anxiety.

Another [writer](#) says:

It is crucial to understand that this is a genuine experience. People with gender dysphoria experience the feeling that their biological body is lying. A person in this situation really thinks that he or she is, should be, or would feel better as, the gender that is opposite to their biological sex, or no gender at all.

If this is true of people who experience gender dysphoria, then it's just as true of those who are intersex, who have atypical characteristics in their sexual anatomy and/

or chromosomes. It's important for us to understand that these are real people with genuine experiences. We would do well to listen carefully to them before responding.

Listening to Stories

As we've said, no two stories are the same. It really helps to listen to stories, like that of Stephen, an older married man who cross-dressed for 34 years before announcing that he would change his name to Stephanie, take cross-sex hormones, and eventually pursue gender reassignment surgery. Or [Kat](#), a Christian who experiences some gender dysphoria, and is seeking to follow Christ wholeheartedly. Or [Lianne](#) – a new friend who's praying for today's sermon – who was born with an intersex condition called Mixed Gonadal Dysgenesis, where some of her cells have a Y chromosome while others do not.

If you haven't had time to listen to stories like these, a good place to start is by listening to a podcast called [Theology in the Raw](#). Go back and listen to episodes 756 and 760. It will be worth your time.

What the Bible Says

So what does the Bible say? To answer this well, we really need to ask three questions. Here they are.

Are male and female the only two sexes?

Genesis 1 and 2 is the most important text to answer this question. One of the most important verses on human identity is Genesis 1:26-27:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.*

I want you to notice the connection between being created and being male and female. Male and female is connected to our reflection of God's image. We don't just reflect God's image as humans in some generic sense, but as *sexed* humans – humans who are male or female. They're embodied identities. Genesis is talking about our entire lives, our embodied lives, as male or female. It covers what we would today call both our biological sex and our gender identity.

In chapter 2 we read about the creation of woman:

So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

*"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;*

*she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man."*

The word "rib" here in Hebrew is actually side. God creates Eve from Adam's side. "The woman is presented wholly as his partner and counterpart ... She is valued for herself alone" (Derek Kidner).

We learn a lot from Genesis 1 and 2:

- Humans are male and female
- Male and female are complementary *and* equal
- Embodied sexual differences are part of what it means to reflect God's image
- Our bodies and are sexual differences are pronounced by God to be very good (Genesis 1:31)

Okay, but what about the rest of the Bible? As we look at the rest of Scripture, we can come to four conclusions:

First, Jesus seems to affirm a male/female binary. In Matthew 19:4-5, Jesus says, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 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'?" He cites both Genesis 1:27 and 2:24.

Second, whenever Scripture talks about crossing gender boundaries, it always speaks negatively. Whenever it speaks of being one sex, and presenting yourself as the opposite sex, it always says that it's wrong. For instance, Deuteronomy 22:5 prohibits cross-dressing. 1 Corinthians 6:9 uses a term that describes men who act like women. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 assumes that men and women are different and that

such differences should be expressed and celebrated. And Romans 1:26-27 seems to argue against same-sex sexual relationships because they violate God's creational design for humanity as sexually different persons.

Third, a biblical view of the human body suggests that biological sex is integral to human identity. The New Testament was written at a time when people held a negative view of the body. They prioritized the spirit or soul and devalued the body. I'd argue that this is common today as well, which is why we tend to prioritize our gender identity over our biological sex. But the biblical view of the body is different. We are embodied beings. Our bodies – including our biological sex – are integral to our personhood. That's why Paul can write, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). God's design for us is wholeness – body and soul integrated together in worship to God. You are your body. You are not a soul trapped in a body; you are an embodied being.

Finally, it appears that sexual differences will be maintained after the resurrection. As [Sam Storms](#) says:

Men will remain anatomically and genitally male forever. Women will remain anatomically and genitally female forever. And both men and women will be aware of this not only in their own bodies but also in the other. It would be a grotesque and unbiblical reversal of God's original creative design if the redeemed in heaven lived as genderless beings.

So we can conclude, as [Preston Sprinkle](#) says:

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 ... 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 through 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.

Can someone be a different gender than their biological sex?

In the first week of this series I said that we are all sexually broken, and yet we serve a God who's eager to forgive and repair our broken sexuality. We believe that the Fall affected every part of our world, including our sexuality. So if you ask me if we can experience a disconnect between our feelings about our gender identity and our biological sex, the answer is absolutely yes. We can experience feelings like this.

This doesn't mean that we can in an ontological sense our gender identity can be different from our biological sex. The Bible links our gender identity and biological sex together.

This really opens a larger discussion about gender, which we're going to talk about in a few weeks. It's an important discussion, because sometimes we can feel different from what our culture says a particular gender should look like.

It also opens up an important discussion about our bodies and our spirits. God created us as embodied creatures, so our bodies matter. This has huge implications for so many areas in our lives. We are embodied. Our bodies matter. God's desire for all of us is greater integration of body and soul, so that we are whole beings, rightly oriented to God.

Again, Preston Sprinkle puts it best:

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 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.

Can someone be a different gender than their biological sex? The answer is: we can feel like it, but Scripture links our biological sex and gender identity and says that we are sexually embodied creatures – but that there is some flexibility in how we express our gender identities.

What about intersex people?

In most cases of intersex people, it's possible to determine biological sex. But there is 1% who are ambiguous. I find what [Preston Sprinkle says](#) to be helpful:

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 ... 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.

How Christians Should Respond

We’ve covered a lot today. Let me try to answer the question of how Christians should respond.

What I would like to say overall is this:

- Develop biblical convictions about sexuality and gender.
- Give voice to some of our concerns, especially about invasive and non-reversible medication and procedures, particularly in children.
- On an individual level, listen and love.

I mentioned the story of Kat earlier. Kat was born and raised in a Christian home, and struggled with gender dysphoria for years. Kat turned away from God at the age of 18. One day Kat went to church and sensed God moving, and realized God’s love.

One day a woman came up and said, “Hey, I notice sometimes you come late and sit alone. I want you to know you always have a place to sit with me.” They got talking,

and Kat asked the woman what she did, and she answered, "My husband and I run a ministry to bridge the gap between the LGBT community and the church."

Kat was blown away and realized this was no accident, but also felt skeptical. Kat looked on her website and realized that she believed in the historic Christian view of marriage and sexuality.

But one day Kat got tired and reached out to her on Facebook and said, "I'm so tired of hearing what everyone else thinks about my gender identity. My parents want me to do one thing. The church wants me to do another. I have the world telling me to just embrace it. What does God think of me? How does God truly look at me?"

She said, "I don't know what he thinks, but I'm willing to walk with you." It's not that she lacked biblical convictions. Kat already knew what she believed. But she was slow to speak, quick to listen, and willing to walk with someone through the dysphoria.

If there is anything I would say today, it's this: **Understand complicated issues around sexuality, and respond with biblical conviction and a willingness to walk with people.**

Andrew Walker says:

Though it may bring new conversations and experiences many of us will not understand, ministry to those with gender dysphoria means walking with each precious soul through what could be years of psychological valleys ... Only Christians humble enough to recognize their own brokenness will be capable of walking with people through struggles that seem very different from their own.

Lord, give us wisdom on this complex issue, and give us love for others. May we experience your grace and offer this grace to others. Thank you for Jesus who is setting this world right, and who invites all of us to come to him. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.