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THE UNENDING BENDING OF GENDER: HELPFUL OR HARMFUL?

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SYNOPSIS

The gender revolution is in full swing, and while many celebrate it enthusiastically, others are wrestling to know if the trend is harmful or helpful. The Bible says people are created male and female, and these two different genders reflect the image of God. Also, Scripture is clear that sin has impacted every detail of creation, including our personal experiences of gender. The distress and confusion that arise from sin in our lives is real and needs true, lasting relief. Today, many advocate for gender bending and a radical new redefining of gender itself, even to the point of erasing it altogether. Many who wrestle with the sense that their gender does not match their biological sex have embraced this. The Bible offers a radically different approach in how to understand ourselves and how to find peace regarding personal gender identity. Gender struggles can't truly be alleviated or resolved by individuals striving to sculpt a new identity for themselves based on personal preferences. The only lasting solution is to reconnect with the Creator and His design for our lives.

Years before gender and the "T" of LGBT were hot topics, a couple came to my office to talk about something I'd never dealt with before.¹ After knowing each other for over a year, Rick had revealed to his girlfriend that he was born female. Cami, upset and disoriented, ended their dating relationship but remained confused about her feelings.

Rick had transitioned fifteen years ago through multiple surgeries and was at peace with his decisions. He was not seeking help for himself but rather for his ex-girlfriend.

Halfway through our conversation, Cami's tough questions emerged: *"Since Rick was born a woman, does that mean I'm gay since I'm attracted to him...to her? And since he lives as a man now, is it OK with God if we date?"*

My conversation with them highlights just one of the difficult choices people face with this issue. Gender topics increasingly have become difficult to comprehend in the cultural free-for-all. A recent study revealed that 0.6 percent of the U.S. population (1.4 million Americans) identifies as transgender.² With new studies and vocabulary emerging daily, it's important for Christians to understand the key topics of this ever-morphing conversation.

Gender identity refers to how individuals experience (or perceive) themselves, as male or female, regardless of their biological sex. And recently, *gender bending*, or the reshaping of traditional understandings of gender (a male–female binary) has become the issue du jour. Facebook was lauded in 2014³ and again in 2016 for advancing the cause of gender "fluidity" by offering 70+ new possible gender categories on their user profile page. In our increasingly gender-bending culture, how does Scripture provide a window on seeing things clearly?

GENDER IDENTITY: WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Who are you? Who am I? Gender is intimately embedded in understanding who we are. "In western culture in the last 200 years we have had the task of sculpting our identity...Our identity as individuals is fluid."⁴ The idea of "sculpting" one's identity means that each person decides which subset of their personal life experience matters the most, such as their body, sexual attractions, social causes, careers, ethnicity, and feelings of maleness or femaleness. Each person has the right to determine who they are based on what they perceive to be most significant to them *personally*.

The Bible, however, addresses personhood and identity with a radically different approach. Scripture does not give us the authority to sculpt ourselves into an image of our own making. Rather, it teaches that we are created, identified, and loved by our Creator for His purposes and glory.

God Created Us with a Gender

The beginning of Scripture clearly identifies two genders. "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen.

1:27).⁵ This verse explains our core identity: we are created by God, and that includes being either male or female. Genesis 1:27 is rich with meaning for the gender conversation. “The first assignments of sex in history were divinely commanded and commended....The male/female complement is thereby God ordained, expressive of both human need and divine nature.”⁶ Elsewhere in Scripture, we see God involved in every detail of our birth, and that includes our biological sex (Ps. 139:13–16).

God does not order gender capriciously but rather with a purpose in view: complementarity. Mark Yarhouse writes, “The view that ‘gender enables unity,’ that is, that ‘man and woman become “one flesh”’ is an important biblical theme from creation that should inform our understanding of redemption.”⁷ Maleness and femaleness, distinct from each other, display a complementary unity in marriage that pictures the union of Christ and his church (Eph. 5:31–33).

God goes even further, revealing Himself throughout Scripture in images of gender. He is as a loving father (Heb. 12:5–9) and a loving mother (Isa. 66:13). Jesus makes it clear that our gender is necessary for marriage (Mark 10:6–8). In creating us as male or female, God gives us a gift as a way to reveal Himself to the world. Ultimately, gender is about Him, *not us!*

Sin Corrupted Sexuality and Gender

Sin has obscured the goodness and purpose of gender that God established. With the introduction of sin throughout creation, our experience of gender (internally and relationally) can now bring turmoil rather than delight. God gave His law (filled with commands and comfort) so that we’d know how to live as His image bearers in a broken world.

Deuteronomy 22:5 condemns gender blurring by saying, “A woman shall not wear a man’s garment, nor shall a man put on a woman’s cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God.” It might seem strange that God cares about our clothing, but it is one of the distinctive ways we express gender. This verse’s meaning goes beyond clothes. “The verb-object clause used in the verse means to ‘put on the mantle’ of the opposite gender — in other words, to live as though you were of the other gender.”⁸

Why would God proclaim that dressing in the opposite gender’s clothing is an “abomination” to Him? This word is used in the Old Testament⁹ to express God’s hatred of sin and rebellion in any area, *not just sexuality or gender*. God’s holiness and protective love for His people does not allow for any form of idolatry in our lives.

Christ Restores What Is Broken

While gender struggles are real, Jesus Christ “has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him” (2 Pet. 1:3). Through relationship with and knowledge of Christ, we can know what it means to be a godly woman or a godly man and what this means for being male and female.

Jesus’ death and resurrection restores (even if not fully in this life) what sin has broken, regarding what it means to be male or female. His redemption of gender happens, in part, as men and women live in godly relationships with one another. “As Paul puts it, ‘in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman’ (1 Cor. 11:11–12)...Manhood is defined in relation to woman and womanliness in relation to man.”¹⁰ Relationships are *that* important.

It is in remaining faithful to Scripture and its view of gender that we are then able to help those who struggle with it.

HELPING THOSE WITH GENDER STRUGGLES¹¹

Unlike Rick, who was content with his decision to transition, there are many who are truly struggling with these issues. There are Christians who struggle with gender dysphoria; they love God yet wrestle with feeling uncomfortable with their biological sex. What can we do to help boys and girls, men and women, grow in understanding the biblical categories of male and female that God has assigned for us? Here are some principles to consider as you approach and speak to someone with gender dysphoria.

Understand That Gender Confusion Rises from a Person in Distress. A realistic understanding of any gender struggle must include a compassionate awareness of the agony a person feels. This means engaging a person and not fighting a culture war. Yes, sound biblical teaching is necessary. When we view a struggler through the lens of Genesis 1 through 3, we see that person living in a “world that is broken at its core, resembling God’s original design, but increasingly showing deep cracks and fissures in how God’s image bearers live and reflect his image.”¹² There are people around us who are not trying to be rebellious. Rather, they are confused and lonely, grappling with a painful experience of not fitting in.

Seek to Affirm Their Struggle. Most who acknowledge gender struggles have been dealing with it for some time. Seek to learn about their struggle of questioning their

gender identity. By asking inviting questions, you will affirm that this struggle is real and matters to you. If this person is connected to your church, this is an especially good opportunity to practice the “one another” commands of Scripture and to live out the picture of rich community in Christ’s body. Seek to journey alongside this person so that he or she does not have to struggle in isolation.

Encourage Them to Bring God into Their Situation. Our culture sees gender as a biological, psychological, and civil rights issue. As such, we have a right to do whatever we want with our bodies. Scripture, however, insists that gender is God’s will for us. Rejecting our gender is like the clay rejecting what the potter has crafted (Isa. 64:8). As we realize that our view of gender is rooted in our heart’s stance toward God, we encourage and assist others to bring this issue before God. “Bringing God into the heart of the situation can do two things: it legitimizes the person’s real distress with their inability to align their physical and psychological selves, and also injects another not-to-be-ignored dynamic: that the person’s distress has an additional element of struggle to it, that to go against God’s design and purpose does bring about increasing confusion and pain.”¹³

As a Christian wrestles with issues of gender identity, the key question he or she faces will be, *Who is Lord over my life? Christ or me?* The questions the world presses in on us are: *How do I make my identity line up with what I’m feeling? What must I do or believe differently to be true to my feelings?* But when my personal identity is grounded in God’s perspective on my life, then a vastly different question comes to the forefront: *To whom do I belong?*

As we seek to make Christ Lord and help others to do the same, the implications for living under His loving authority in the area of gender will follow. While Rick didn’t want help, Cami did. I told her that she and Rick were not free to date, because in God’s eyes, Rick was still a woman.

Yes he’d changed his body and name, but no amount of hormones or surgery can erase the reality that he had been born a woman. Cami wasn’t same-sex attracted but had fallen in love with Rick, whom she understood to be a man.

The lordship of Christ compels us all to live privately and publicly according to the gender God assigned to us at birth. Strugglers will need patient guidance in pursuing costly obedience through their personal Garden of Gethsemane, bending before God and committing, “Not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). This process will be complicated and painful. But Christ promises to meet anyone in the pain of dying to self so as to live for His glory.

Encourage the Individual to Pursue Authentic and Loving Relationships. It is living honestly and openly in relationship that we learn to experience and live out the gender that matches our biological sex. We need others to give us feedback on who we are and are to become. Rather than pushing for conformity to cultural gender stereotypes, help strugglers learn what godly relationships look like with both genders. As the Rev. Dr. Sam Andreaes says, for example, “Being a man, Scriptures tell us, is ‘Lay down your life’ for the close women in your life....And in so doing, you will find that you are a man!”¹⁴ Because we are created in the image of a triune God, we grow as men and women in Christ-honoring relationships with other men and women.

Encourage the Individual to Get Help to Address Deeper Issues. Often, persistent struggles are tied to other experiences and circumstances in our lives. Counselors, mature Christians, and spiritual leaders can provide wisdom in understanding how trauma, losses, or relational conflicts with family and others may have affected a person’s view of self, including gender.

HELPING FAMILIES NAVIGATE THE GENDER STORM

The gender revolution is sweeping today’s children and adolescents toward a gender-redefining world. How do we guide them, and the parents of these children, through this tsunami of change? Here are several ideas for practical action.

Teach Children That Life Is for God’s Glory. As early as possible, children need to be taught that their purpose on Earth is to live as loved ones of God, living for His glory by fulfilling His purposes in their life. Romans 12:1–2 exhorts us to present our entire lives as a “living sacrifice” to God and to live in radical nonconformity to the world. Why? Because we belong to Jesus, and everything about us is to be aligned under His loving kingship. Teaching young children to live in godly ways is one way they’ll grow to know they can glorify Him, even as preschool-aged image bearers. If your kids are older, then start where they are.

Model How to Struggle Well with Pain and Disappointment. Kids today grow up in a me-first world, with personal comfort ruling the day. Christ said that following Him involves denying ourselves (Luke 9:23–24). Kids who feel internal turmoil regarding their gender will not be helped by parents who make pain avoidance a priority. Facing trials in this life is to be expected; for some, a significant trial will be via gender struggles. Hebrews 4:16 invites God’s people of all ages to come to Him for help and

mercy whenever we need it. How crucial it will be for children who experience gender dysphoria to learn how to collapse upon God's love and comfort in their time of need instead of listening to "answers" the world gives.

Teach Kids about Gender Distinctions and Avoid Rigid Stereotypes. Gender stereotypes are cultural boundary lines that become legalistic and confining but have, nonetheless, a hint that gender differences exist and that they do matter. Stereotypes describe what is common to many boys, girls, men, or women, but they should never be "rules" for how we express our gender. Andreades says culture gives the "clothing" of gender. We may express our gender through colors like pink versus blue, but the essence of gender is not pink or blue. As we encourage children to live in conformity with their birth sex, we must not insist on certain cultural expressions of gender as being biblical. "[The] Bible does not say, 'A man is this' and 'A woman is that,' but rather 'Man, do this for her.' 'Woman, do that for him.' It is clearer on action than on essence."¹⁵ A man's call is to lay down his life, which might mean taking out the trash for his household, serving in the church nursery, or sewing his wife's hemline. Scripture gives latitude in how we express gender through our actions, and parents are to be on the frontlines of modeling this to their kids.

Redirect Children Who Express a Desire to Pursue Medical Action. Gender confusion is not solved by puberty-blocking hormones or surgery. Paul McHugh, former psychiatrist-in-chief at Johns Hopkins, has long warned against radical measures taken in response to gender dysphoria, particularly reassignment surgeries. He says that medical personnel who advocate for hormone treatments for prepubescent children are wreaking havoc. "Given that close to 80% of such children would abandon their confusion and grow naturally into adult life if untreated, these medical interventions come close to child abuse. A better way to help these children: with devoted parenting."¹⁶

Wise parenting redirects a child away from developing unbiblical self-interpretations and toward the truth of the gospel. This will require parents' patience, listening, and teaching. Don't go it alone. Invite mature Christians to encourage and help you in your parenting. Once again, this is an opportunity for God's people to be His image-bearers through real, life-sharing relationships.

A final note regarding the suicidal ideation to which gender distress can lead. This is real and should not be taken lightly. However, the best help for suicide prevention is not pursuing puberty blocking drug therapy or reassignment surgery. The findings of Johns Hopkins's thirty-year study of individuals who had undergone

gender reassignment surgery are sobering yet insightful in this regard. "Beginning about 10 years after having the surgery, the transgendered began to experience increasing mental difficulties. Most shockingly, their suicide mortality rose almost 20-fold above the comparable non-transgender population."¹⁷

As hard as it can be to shepherd a child through the internal anguish of gender confusion in conformity to God's Word, doing so demonstrates true love for the child. As already noted, sin has corrupted everything, and gender struggle may be a lifelong battle for some. However, it's also important to note that as many as 98 percent of gender-confused boys and 88 percent of gender-confused girls eventually accept their biological sex after naturally passing through puberty.¹⁸

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

What might be the next waves to wash over society as the gender tsunami continues? The blurring of genders will likely continue to impact more spheres of society. Consider these possibilities:

-Medical professionals will most likely face new and complicated cases resulting from surgeries and pharmacology. New ethical questions will arise regarding treatment of transgendered individuals.

-Athletics may move increasingly toward gender neutrality regarding competition and composition of teams, which traditionally have been categorized according to men and women. New categories will need to be established when/ if the traditional female/male binary is unacceptable.

-The shape of "family" will morph as the traditional binary is pushed aside. Consider a child who grows up with two parents who both identify as gender neutral. The concepts of *mom and dad* may begin to fade, since they are tied to the gender binary.

No matter what will come, we know this: there will be refugees of the gender revolution. We will see people hurting, feeling displaced, and disillusioned that the freedom they pursued has not given them the peace and contentment they desired. The hope held out by the world to gender nonconforming and dysphoric boys and girls, men and women, won't work. It doesn't have the power to do so.

Jesus Christ does have the power to bring internal peace, and so the gender revolution presents another amazing opportunity for His followers. Will we stand firm on biblical truth and reach out with God's compassion? The church will be forced actually to be the church, offering the radical life orientation that comes only through the gospel. Will parents and youth leaders boldly and patiently disciple children and youth in the context of their individual stories of struggle and angst? Our identity as the people of God compels us to engage the world with mercy and truth, reflecting our Creator and Lord who did the same.

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NOTES

- 1 Details changed to protect identities.
- 2 The Williams Institute, "How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?" June 2016, <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/How-Many-Adults-Identify-as-Transgender-in-the-United-States.pdf>.
- 3 Chris Edwards, "Facebook Provides Opportunity for Lesson in Gender Identity," The Huffington Post, February 2, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-edwards/facebook-provides-opportu_b_4790977.html.
- 4 "The Why Factor: Identity," BBC World Service, April 1, 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03pc38s>.
- 5 All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.
- 6 Joe Dallas, "The Transsexual Dilemma," *Christian Research Journal* 31, 1 (2008): 24; available at <http://www.equip.org/article/the-transsexual-dilemma/>.
- 7 Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 36.
- 8 Tim Geiger, "Transgenderism: The Reshaping of Reality," *Harvest USA Magazine*, Fall 2016, available online at harvestusa.org.
- 9 See Leviticus 18:22, 26, 27, 29; Deuteronomy 7:25; 14:3; 17:1, 4; 18:12.
- 10 Sam A. Andreades, *enGendered: God's Gift of Gender Difference in Relationship* (Wooster, OH: Weaver Book Company, 2015), 57.
- 11 Much of this section has been influenced by articles in the Fall 2016 issue of *Harvest USA Magazine*, available online at harvestusa.org.
- 12 Nicholas Black, "Gender Confusion: What Do We Say to Someone?" *Harvest USA Magazine*, Fall 2016, available online at harvestusa.org.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Rev. Dr. Sam Andreades, "The Tragedy of Transgenderism," sermon, Faith Reformed Presbyterian Church, September 6, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcR6j22KndU>.
- 15 Andreades, *enGendered: God's Gift of Gender Difference in Relationship*, 56.

- 16 Paul McHugh, "Transgender Surgery Isn't the Solution," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 13, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/paul-mchugh-transgender-surgery-isnt-the-solution-1402615120>.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Michelle Cretella, MD, "Gender Dysphoria in Children," The American College of Pediatricians, August 2016, <https://www.acped.org/the-college-speaks/position-statements/gender-dysphoria-in-children>.