

TRANSFORMATION. A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

Introduction: I want to talk about the issue of gender today. And the first question you might ask is why? That is a good question, one I asked myself this week as I was preparing. 😊

This is a highly topical issue. It is on the news a lot. It is being talked about. It is a hot button topic esp. with our young people.

- # It was the dominate issue in Scottish politics over the last year. Nearly brought down the govt.
- # Issues around choosing ones gender is being promoted in schools.
- # Public places are being questioned around their policies about toilets and changing rooms
- # It headlines when people like Possie Parker - a radical feminist, comes and wants to speak on the issue.
- # JK Rowling has been vilified for her stance on the issue
- # There is a massive rise in the number of children who are confused around their gender
- # We are being taught we need to use different pronouns for people
- # NZ recently changed the law so that for 55 dollars you can change your birth certificate that declares your gender
- # We are now being told there are multiple genders we can choose from.
- # There is a confusing array of terms to get your head around cisgender. Non binary etc.

It might seem an abstract issue until

- # your child comes home from school and says they don't want to be a girl anymore
- # someone who identifies as trans is in your work place and wants to use different pronouns.
- # someone who is trans, but that you did not even realize was, suddenly commits suicide.
- # someone in your homegroup or your family confesses that they have never felt comfortable in their biological body.

Then it becomes no longer abstract but very real. And very confusing.

Now I realize that for many of us this is not an issue. You might say men are men, women are women. You shake your head. Or even ridicule the debate or the people involved. Why are we even talking about this.

NZ 2020 ,8 % adults identified as transgender. Approx.. 32000 Other figures have it at closer to 20,000

But 2012 survey suggested around 4% of NZ young people either unsure of gender or identified as trans. So if put that into context of say Hargest that is 64 kids. Even if you are not grappling with it, your children and grandchild are.

Now I enter this space with some trepidation. This is a hot button issue which I have never spoken about it before. My learning on this are new. Read extensively on both sides of this debate.

I don't claim to have all the answers or be an expert on this matter. While I have read the stories of people who identify as trans, I have not spent time personally with anyone. I have not walked the journey with anyone or with a parent

In the sermon summary I include some of references I have used. Churches and Christians have different views on this subject. There is not a uniform response. So I enter this space with humility. I can't cover all the issues in 20 minutes. This is a complex space.

Much of the material below is from an online article 5 things Every Christian should know about the Transgender Conversation by Preston Sprinkle and his book Embodied. I recommend both.

1. Trans people are people, not issues

The discussion around trans stuff can focus on issues like bathrooms. Or policies. Or ideologies. And the language we use is one of outrage and anger. And in the midst of it all, we forget that transpeople are people

They are made in the image of God. They are good people, beautiful people, who are worthy of dignity and respect. We need to listen to them and learn from them and love them. They are not issues to be solved.

Our reputation is one of being judgmental and angry. We are seen as anti gay, anti trans, anti lots of things. Jesus somehow had a reputation for being for people.

Alan grew up as a pastors kid. Ever since he could remember he had a desire to dress and act like a woman,. But he saw how his church reacted to the LGBTQ community and so told no one. When he left school, he left the church, tired of the hypocrisy he saw. But one day a Christian friend asked to hear Alan's story and so he told him, including his desire to be a woman. To his utter surprise his friend loved him and told him the God loved him, despite his desires. Because of the grace he was shown, he gave his life to the Lord. He says without this grace he would have transitioned to be a woman and walked away from God.

Stephanie grew up as typical girl, although on the spectrum for autism. When she was 13, she told her mother out of the blue that she was transgender. Her mum found this was after she heard a talk at school about it. She went to a clinic about it and was told she had to refer to her daughter with masculine pronouns and a m masculine name. She was also directed to put her on puberty blocking drugs. Her Mum feared if she pushed back on this she might be reported to the education dept, as was the policy where she lived

Benjamin is a pastor but his whole life has struggled with gender dysphoria



Hannah is a friendly lovely Christian who transitioned from a female to a male a few years ago.
Kyla transitioned to a male 8 years ago but then encountered Jesus and transitioned back to a female.

These are real people, who are grappling with real issues. They are precious and loved by God

2. Trans people are diverse.

There is a scholar in this field who makes the statement. “ If you have met on trans person, you have met one trans person. “ I.e. peoples experiences are very diverse and we can’t lump people together. Some experience gender dysphoria from a very young age Some don’t experience it until after adolescence. Some experience it their whole lives, for others it goes away. In fact 61-88% of children who experience gender dysphoria grow out of it. Some people who identify as trans never experience dysphoria at all. Some identify as trans and believe they were born into the wrong body. Some want to transition. Some do not. Transition can involve social transition, others transition physically by surgery,

If someone identifies to you they are trans, you really know nothing more about the person except that they identify as trans. It is an umbrella identity.

3. Sex is different from Gender

This is where for many the conversation gets confusing really fast. Prior to 1970, gender and sex were used interchangeably. But now they are used to mean different things.

Sex refers to biological sex. I.e. whether you were born male or female. Gender is more complicated. It is the psychological, social and cultural aspects of being male or female.

Gender Identity. Internal sense of self as male or female, or both, or neither.

Gender expression. How a person express themselves through clothing, hairstyle etc.

Gender role. A cultural expectation for how males and females should act

In the discussion around trans, the primary area of focus and debate is this idea of gender identity. What is it. Is it subjective or objective. The key question is this:

If someone experiences tension between their biological sex and their gender identity, which one determines who they are and why?

Now for most of us, we have never experienced such tension and so this seems a very abstract question. But for some this is a very real and lived experience.

4. Most gender stereo types comes from culture, not the Bible.

Bible and science recognize two categories of biological sex. Male and female. A small number might be both (intersex)

But the Bible doesn’t give us anything as to how we should act within these. Virtually no prescriptions of how we should act with these two.

Culturally, males are sometimes seen as tough, and strong, breadwinners, leaders in world and at home. But this is not prescribed in the Bible.

What is a Biblical vision of manhood? I once gave a men’s talk on what it meant to be a Biblical man. I struggled to find anything that did not apply to a Christian woman as well We are called to be godly. Manhood can’t relate to being a father as some are single, as was Jesus.

Culturally, women are seen as nurturing and kind, and look after the children. This is a cultural assumption but it is not a Biblical view.

In the Bible men kiss other men, cry, and are emotional. Read about the relationship between Jonathon and David. They are called to be loving sensitive, kind, peacemakers and to teach children. The description in Prov 31 description defies stereo types. She is an entrepreneur, social activist and a breadwinner

Jesus defied cultural stereo types. Sure he stood up the religious leaders and overturned the tables in the temple But he wept over Jerusalem, and let others hit him. He loved those who opposed him and hung out with the outcasts and women. This was not what a Jewish man was meant to do.

How gender is expressed is very cultural. Two very simple examples. Scots men wear kilts. Samoans men have wrap around skirts. We are called to act more like Jesus. Not more like a man or a woman

5. Our bodies are good.

The fundamental truth about our human identity is found in Gen 1:27 God created humankind in his own image In the image of God he created them, male and female in created them.

Now what does it mean to bear the image of God?

Profound question. The word for “Image” is the same word that is used for an idol. So if you make a wooden idol, it represents a spiritual deity. So we are a physical representation of the non physical being that is God. Obviously we are more than just physical beings. But our physical being is a key part of what it means to be made in the image of God.

And this physical being of ours is either male or female. This is a scientific reality. We are one gender or the other. And nothing can change this. How you express your gender or having an operation cannot change your sex. Our sexual being is integral to who we are in the image of God.

And are bodies are described as good In fact sacred. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit says Paul in 1 Cor 6:19-20. We are not our true selves without our bodies. This is why the Bible says that when Christ returns we will be given a new physical body. We cannot be defined apart from our embodied sex.



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What are the arguments used from the Bible that gender should win over sex. I.e. if we sense tension then our internal sense should win over biological.

1. Genesis 1 assumes non binary aspect to creation i.e. God creates day and night. This argument says that these descriptions are like the outer limits of categories. But in between day and night is dusk. Or God created creatures for the land and sea. But some animals fall between the two i.e. a frog. So when God says he created male and female, that does not exclude anything in between. You could fall between these two, goes the argument

But the Bible only ever gives two categories for humans, male and female. Humans differ in how they are male and female, but this doesn't mean sex categories exist in addition to male and female. By saying male and female, it is referring to biological sex. Not what we have labelled gender identity.

2. Jesus acceptance of he eunuch.

This is one of the most common arguments. At the end of a conversation about marriage and divorce Jesus said. Matt 19:12. "There are eunuchs who were born that way, others have been made eunuchs and some choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom. Those who can accept this should accept it." Jesus is using eunuchs to illustrate his point about not marrying. In the ancient world eunuchs were always male. Some were born with issues e.g. either intersex. or infertile. Some had been castrated. They are an illustration of singleness and Jesus affirms them. Both contradicted the OT law and societies view of masculinity. The story in Acts of the eunuch shows they are accepted into the new community of faith. But there is no indication this is about how the person feels about their biological sex. It is about gender stereo types and singleness but not about trans as we know it.

3. Gal 3:28 neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male or female for you are all one in Christ.

The argument is that Paul is saying the sex differences no longer matter, But Paul is not arguing that these differences disappear when we become Christians. He is arguing for equality. The woman who is the second class citizen in society is equal in the kingdom. The slave and the Gentile are equal. We know that these differences don't disappear when we become Christians. They are just not limiting factors for who we are in the church and the kingdom

4. No marriage in the resurrection Luke 20:35-36, Matthew 22:30

Jesus is having a debate with the religious leaders about marriage. He says that in the life to come there will be no marriage, we will be like the angels. Some argue this means the differences between sexes will be removed and we will sort of be androgynous beings. But Jesus never said that: just that we would not marry. Jews did not see angels as sexless. And Jesus resurrected body was recognizable as a man.

What are some key factors that have created this cultural war? Why does this suddenly seem to have become so dominant in society?

- # Relativism no right or wrong. Meaning and truth are relative. No one has the authority to tell us how to live.
- # Individualism we can focus on ourselves, and we are free from any obligations
- # Sexual revolution separate sex from marriage and procreation. Your body is your own to do what you want with.
- # Gnosticism. This was around in the NT times. The physical world is bad and broken and your inner authentic self is separate and better than your body
- # Consumerism. The person we want to be is our true self. We can be whatever we choose to be.
- # Queer theory . Seeks to normalize homosexuality says our identities are not fixed

How can we as a church respond to the growing trans community?

We have a place to oppose destructive ideologies on our culture today. Especially when we see the impact it is having on our children. But anger and outrage do not change the world Love does.

We need to ensure we reject gender and cultural stereo types, and not dress them in spiritual language. If we allowed a far more truly Biblical view of gender expression it might allow those trans believers to more easily express themselves with their male or female sex.

We do not have to be bullied into accepting the radical teaching of society that says that rejects God's created order of male and female.

We should actively welcome trans people into the church community and be creating a community where they feel safe. Esp given the high degree of loneliness, suicide and exclusion from families Jesus went out of his way to identify with the marginalized in society. And the shamed and hurting wanted to be with Jesus. If Jesus were here today he would have trans friends. We need a posture of humility, recognizing we don't know or understand another persons journey.

We need to recognize that every person carries a distorted image of who they were meant to be. We all our on a journey to find our true identity in Jesus Christ. This is a life time journey. So we need to be patient as we journey with those who struggle with gender identity.

Lesli was born a female but from age 4 felt like a boy. She also feel in love with Jesus. As she grew older she increasingly struggled to relate to being a female. She became increasingly depressed and suicidal. When she shared with a pastor she was told to leave never come back. Lesli left the church and found love and acceptance in the LGBTQ community. She fell in love with a woman, Sue, and they married. Sue had a condition that caused her hands to shake. One night she went outside for a smoke, and as she was lighting the cigarette, she lit herself on fire.



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Leslie rushed outside to see her partner aflame. Sue died from her injuries 3 days later. Lesli was obviously traumatized and grief stricken. She had not been in a church for 18 years, but for some reason wanted a church to do the funeral. She called the only church she could think of, one that was very conservative.

This is what she said. HI, my name is Leslie and my wife just died. We're lesbians, but um, I want to know if you would do my wife's funeral.

The pastor didn't say. I will have to think about this. Or. Well, here is what we think about transgender issues or lesbian issues.

Remember this is a very conservative church. He said. We would be honored to. I am sorry for your loss. You must be truly grieving right now. I can't imagine what it would be like to lose a loved one. Please. Lesli, let us take care of all the details of the funeral. – the cost, the arrangements, whatever you need. Please Lesli, let us love you through your pain.

The church surrounded Lesli with love, something she had not experienced from Christians before. Only from the LGBTQ community. Her experience brought Leslie back to faith and love for Jesus. She prefers to identify now as non binary and be addressed by they them pronouns. She believes in a traditional view of marriage between a man and a woman. She is attracted to the same sex. She has a deep and profound love for God and lives out her faith in many practical ways.

I think this is an incredibly powerful story.

It shows the real struggle of people

It shows the impact of rejection

It shows the power of outrageous love

It shows the fact the discipleship is a journey. We might struggle that Lesli sees herself as non binary. Or that he is attracted to the same sex. But she like all of us is on a journey and she is living out her faith in powerful ways to others.

May we be the kind of church that Lesli experienced.

Download or listen to this message at:

www.icbc.org.nz

REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

What is your gut reaction to the issues around transgender and this sermon?

Have you had any personal experience with those who are transgender?

What questions does this sermon raise for you?

How would you react to someone who is trans being part of Central? Or your small group?

What are the pros and cons of agreeing to using the preferred pronouns of a person?

Do you think Jesus would have trans friends? Would you find that personally difficult?

Why would the church be seen as an unsafe place for a trans person? How can we act with grace and yet remain true to our convictions?

RESOURCES

Recommended Books:

Embodied
God and the Transgender Debate

Preston Sprinkle
Andrew T Walker

Recommended Web Articles

<https://www.eauk.org/resources/what-we-offer/reports/transformed-understanding-transgender-in-a-changing-culture>

<https://rootedministry.com/preparing-christian-children-transgender-moment/>

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-transgender-fantasy>

Alternative Views

<https://www.hrc.org/resources/what-does-the-bible-say-about-transgender-people>

<https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/ask-a-transgender-christian-response>



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