

GENDER DYSPHORIA

a pastoral letter

Steve Froehlich

Gender Dysphoria: A Pastoral Letter © 2016, Steven D. Froehlich

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About the Author

Steve Froehlich has served as senior pastor of New Life Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Ithaca, NY since 1998. He completed graduate theological and pastoral studies at Reformed Theological Seminary (MDiv, 1991) and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (DMin, 2015). His doctoral thesis, *Faithful Presence: How Community Formation Shapes the Understanding and Practice of Calling*, engages the ideas of James Davison Hunter's *To Change the World* and explores their impact on discipleship in Christian community. Previously, Steve served as assistant to the founding pastor of Highlands Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Ridgeland, MS; Executive Vice President of Reformed Theological Seminary (Jackson, MS); and board chair of Chesterton House Center for Christian Studies at Cornell University. Steve and his wife, Sheryl, have three sons and four grandchildren. Sheryl, a gifted speaker, writer, and teacher, serves as Assistant to the Director of Admission at Ithaca College, Ithaca, NY.

INTRODUCTION

This is a pastoral letter. I'm writing in response to questions, requests from the congregation for an explanation of what God has disclosed in his word about living with gender dysphoria and about living with those we love who experience gender dysphoria.

Writing this letter is a humbling challenge because my motivation for engaging in this conversation is a desire to serve brothers and sisters about whom we as a church family care deeply. We as a church family are learning to extend and invite trust regarding some of the most vulnerable (and often wounded) parts of our being. Our goal is to find deep joy and hope together in living all of life to the glory of God.¹

This pastoral endeavor is a daunting task in part because I am writing as an outsider. I do not experience gender dysphoria. Yet, while I cannot claim to know this struggle first hand, it is the nature of life in community for grace to be mediated to each other and to resonate helpfully even across our varied experiences. This means that we can speak and give to each other, respectfully and carefully, as well as learn from each other even when our life experiences are different.

Because grace flourishes in community, I'm committed to conversation – to listening carefully first² and to asking questions that invite others to tell their stories and disclose their hearts. To that end I am praying earnestly, reading what's available, learning from those who live with gender dysphoria, and talking with godly and informed people whose conviction, wisdom, and love have greatly benefited this letter – I'm deeply grateful.

My first commitment is faithfully to apply the Scriptures, to say to you what God says (no more, no less), and humbly to admit what I do not yet know or understand. I ask you to forgive me where I err – it is not from indifference or carelessness. I ask you to be patient with me where I am unclear or tedious – I'm trying to be understood as well as not to be misunderstood. I recognize also that there is no way I can adequately address every aspect of this complex subject.

My second commitment is to call you to the kind of community that reflects God's purpose and heart for us as his people. Of this kind of formative committed community Jonathan Grant writes:

Living faithful Christian lives is impossible unless we are nourished and sustained by a vision of what human flourishing looks like – what philosophers call our picture of the “good life.” Unless we really come to love this vision at the unspoken levels deep within ourselves, and come to understand our whole lives as heroic adventures to walk faithfully within this vision, our perspective will be pulled out of shape and distorted by our cultural context, tantalizing us as it does with unrealistic expectations of sexual satisfaction and relational perfection.³

¹ 1 Cor 10:31 “Whether you eat or drink, do all to the glory of God.” The opening question of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* affirms that our “primary purpose is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

² Jas 1:19 “be quick to listen, slow to speak.”

³ Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age*, Kindle 2631.

We have to be intentional about this kind of community formation since much of life as we have learned it is shaped by the self-focused priorities of independence and happiness.⁴ God has loved us first and at our worst,⁵ and we have been called to offer God's *shalom* to the foreigner and stranger (both ethnically and culturally) in our midst.⁶ Jesus leads the way for us by mingling his life (without any hint of reluctance or embarrassment⁷) with the poor, the prisoners, the broken, and the oppressed.⁸ If we believe the gospel, we are to gather around us and be present in the lives of those for whom the good news is not only life-changing truth, but also comfort for their weary bones and sweetness to their parched lips. To those we love who live with gender dysphoria we say with love, gentleness, and devotion: "We want to be on the journey with you so that together we can wrestle well and learn together what it means to be faithful to Jesus. Together we will entrust our lives to him and look to his provision of rest, healing, hope, and significance."

I mentioned that this is a pastoral letter. It's also a long letter. I don't know how to state briefly concepts and ideas that are new territory for most of us. Plus, I'm writing with a self-conscious desire to speak respectfully and carefully. I want to avoid abrupt, terse, clinical statements that may communicate a callous or unlistening heart.

While there is much more to be said and much more to be learned about every dimension of this conversation (medically, spiritually, theologically, socially, psychologically, pastorally, etc), I offer these thoughts as a first step in shaping our congregational understanding and life as God's people in a changing culture

Yours for New Life,



Steve Froehlich, pastor

⁴ "One of the most influential legacies of modern politics and philosophy is the conviction that personal identity is premised on the individual's freedom to choose his or her own source of meaning and form of life, largely free from outside influences. This conviction has seeped so deeply into Western consciousness that it has become part of the religious landscape." (Grant, 233-235)

⁵ Gen 3:8-9; Rom 5:8; 1 Pet 3:18; 1 Jn 4:10, 19.

⁶ Lev 19:34 "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (cf. Ex 20:10; Lev 19:10; Dt 10:18).

⁷ Mt 11:19 Jesus is untroubled by the accusation that he is no different than the people with whom he is openly mingling his life.

⁸ Luke 4:18-19 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." With this brief sermon from Isaiah 61, Jesus charts the course of his and our incarnational life and work. Each of us can find ourselves in the brokenness of the world outlined by Jesus: economic hardship, political oppression, physical brokenness, social alienation. At the end of his earthly ministry, when Jesus commissions the Church to "go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15), he is promising to be powerfully present with us as we, in his name and by his grace, are present with one another in every area of life which longs for the restoration of *shalom*. If we are to be gospel-centered communities, our own *need* for God's grace must be as obvious as the *provision* of his grace. It is common for us as earnest Christians to want to protect our communities from perceived threats. As a result we often build barriers that obscure Christ and distort the gospel. Our communities need to be open to all who need grace so that the path to Jesus is clear and unobstructed. These kinds of communities are often not tidy. We will incur risk, but that is the life of faith for God's people.

THE JOURNEY & THE STORY

Recently, I had the privilege of presenting an all-day Pastors' Forum at a respected conservative theological seminary on the theme of Pastoral Care and Gender Dysphoria. I asked the 250 leaders in attendance, "How many of you have someone in your congregation who lives with gender dysphoria?" Two or three hands went up. "How many of you know someone in your relational network who lives with gender dysphoria?" A dozen hands went up. "How many of you know your day is coming?" As an uneasy laughter spread across the room, nearly every hand went up.

My day came about two and a half years ago, and I was unprepared.

I have known Chris (I've changed the name) for nineteen years, for the entirety of my current pastorate. Chris was three when I arrived, a covenant child of one of our core families in the congregation. Over the past two decades, I can say honestly that no one in the church family has been more hospitable than Chris. Yet, the gregariousness often masked an anguished unseen part of Chris's life. Twice in high school Chris attempted suicide, and Chris's arms still bear scars from many years of cutting. By the time Chris made it halfway through college, after years of searching the Bible, speaking with counselors, and reading medical literature, Chris had concluded that the terror and torment of life especially post-puberty was the result of gender dysphoria.

Chris is biologically female yet has never known a time, even from age three or four, in which it ever seemed normal to identify as female. Chris's mom remembers brushing off adamant early childhood objections Chris would make when asked to wear a dress, "Mom, I'm not a girl. I'm a boy."

My heart breaks when I think about a lifetime of pain Chris has experienced on top of fear of rejection, longing for belonging, and uncertainty about where to go for help. Yet, even in the mysterious recesses of our being and the chaotic avalanche of life, dare we entrust ourselves together to the omnipotent love of God and the promise of the gospel to bring healing and hope? I find myself responding with the same helpless confidence of Peter in his reply to Jesus, "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."⁹

Chris and I had coffee to talk about the implications of living with gender dysphoria. I have long admired Chris for being smart, motivated, and honest, and I knew that whatever Chris had to say would be carefully thought out. In a nutshell, Chris said, "I want you to know that I am committed to Jesus and to living faithfully as a Christian. I want you to know that I love our church – it's my family and I feel safe there. And I want you to know I've decided to present as male. I'm going by Chris. I believe the conflict I've been facing in my life related to my gender identity is the result of something that's not working correctly in my body. I know that God did not create us to live with this conflict, and the conflict I'm facing is a result of the Fall. But, I've

⁹ Jn 6:68.

concluded that the only way I can live with any meaningful resolution to this conflict is to live as a male. In fact, I believe that I really am male and that this decision to transition is a move toward the kind of wholeness God has in mind for us.”

Oh, the things they don't teach pastors in seminary.

My mind was racing as I prayerfully considered how to respond. Here was a young person I love and genuinely like and value, a covenant child whose pain and struggle over the years had drawn me into deep concern and prayer, a friend who was trying both to survive and to live faithfully. What do I say? Of course, there was much to affirm in what Chris had shared, not the least of which was an enduring faith in Christ and a commitment to the Body of Christ. Thanks be to God! As I pondered what to say to Chris, I knew (obviously) that I had much to learn and that I did not know how to evaluate the decision Chris was making to identify as male. But I replied to my friend, “I’m willing to know you as you want to be known. I have no doubt that you fear the possibility of rejection and even anger in response to this decision, but I promise you that I will never shame you and I am committed to standing with you as your friend. I’m proud of you for the courage it takes to take these steps, and for your commitment to live by faith. Is that enough for now?”

Chris nodded gratefully, and so began my journey into pastoral care and gender dysphoria.

WHERE TO BEGIN?

Since that conversation with Chris, several books by Christian authors related to gender identity and the transgender movement have rolled off the presses. Most helpful to me has been Mark Yarhouse’s *Understanding Gender Dysphoria* which lays out a challenging framework within which parents and disciplers can work out a plan of pastoral care and within which those living with gender dysphoria can find some moorings to map a way forward.

One of the most important reminders Yarhouse makes repeatedly is: “when you’ve met one person with gender dysphoria... you’ve met one person with gender dysphoria.”

Chris’s story is one story, not everyone’s story. And this is my one story about learning to serve and shepherd Chris and our church family.

Because of its basic character in our lives, much of our so-called understanding about sex has been assumed. It’s the water in which we as humans have been swimming for our entire history, and as Jonathan Grant reminds us in *Divine Sex*, those watery currents are hard to see unless together we find ways to step back. So, I think it’s important to affirm that as we collectively embark on this study of gender and sexuality, we are engaging in a work that will likely take a long time to complete. We would do well to remember that the Christian Church did not settle the doctrine of the Incarnation until the 5th Century (I’m not implying that these questions will take that long to resolve). And while sexual and gender identity are essential to humanness and therefore of great importance to human flourishing and Christian

sanctification, it is not of the same order of doctrine as the Incarnation. Fear entices us to believe otherwise. We need to learn how to give these matters a just measure, the weight they are due.

My prayer is that my thoughts here will be a small contribution to a much larger ongoing conversation that needs to mature within the Church. These thoughts are not the final word on the subject, and I still have much to learn. As I continue to listen and learn, my most immediate concern is that I be a faithful shepherd to the flock entrusted to my care.

Chris sees himself as member of the LGBTQ+ community, but he does not represent the transgender movement. Similarly, everything going on in the transgender movement playing out sensationally in the media and politics does not represent Chris. Chris is one person, and my responsibility is to walk faithfully with Chris in the story of his life.

Yes, I just used the male pronoun. More on that later.

WHO AM I?

Not long before his execution at Flossenbürg Prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer penned the poem “Who Am I?” which closes with these lines:

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine,
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine!

His question about identity resonates deeply in all of us. Even Jesus recognizes our search for identity when he asks implicitly, “Do you want to find yourself?”¹⁰ Most of us have wrestled to answer the question, “Who am I?” Some have been driven to the brink of despair in the search for answers. Some of us have cut ourselves, plunged into excess, withdrawn, and run away. Yet, regardless of where we have gone for answers, help, and hope, most of us recognize in our struggle that the world and our part in it are not the way it’s supposed to be.

As Christians who believe in the faithfulness of a covenant God, we know that even when answers to “Who am I?” prove elusive and inexact, we can turn to the Lord who knows everything there is to know about us. With Bonhoeffer we can say, “I am thine!” Even when we cannot understand ourselves,¹¹ he knows us. He has laid down his life for us so that he can say with everlasting joy, “You are mine!”¹² So, we grapple with these deep questions of identity as people who have been embraced by our covenant God who is with us and for us, who will never leave us or forsake us. As he repeatedly calls and comforts us, “Do not be afraid.”

¹⁰ Mt 10:39.

¹¹ Jn 4:16-30. The Samaritan woman at the well responds to Jesus’ knowledge of her marital history with the exclamation, “He knows me!” Surely her relational failures reveal someone who doesn’t know herself, yet she invites anyone who will listen, “Come meet the man who told me everything I’ve ever done.” What is it that quiets our desperate quest to find identity in men (or women), marriage, or sex? Knowing that we are known by the One who loves us most.

¹² Is 43:1.

With our Shepherd's reassurance in mind, I've organized these thoughts into four general areas.

- First, a brief introduction of gender dysphoria followed by an overview of my approach.
- Second, a discussion of principles that inform my understanding of and response to gender dysphoria.
- Third, a focused consideration of how biblical views of sex and gender inform our understanding of gender dysphoria as a condition.
- Fourth, an application of that understanding to pastoral care in our life together as a congregation.

I. UNDERSTANDING & OVERVIEW OF GENDER DYSPHORIA.

A. What Is Gender Dysphoria?

This conversation is specifically about the condition and experience of gender dysphoria and not about the many topics and issues that fall under the much more multi-dimensional term “transgender.” I am addressing gender dysphoria in the context of congregational and pastoral relationships, not the transgender movement sensationalized in politics and the media.

Mark Yarhouse, one of the few biblically faithful Christian clinicians and researchers specializing in sexual and gender identity, defines gender dysphoria as “the experience of distress associated with the incongruence wherein one’s psychological and emotional gender identity does not match one’s biological sex.”¹³ Gender dysphoria exists when one’s interior¹⁴ identification (I am male, I am female) conflicts with one’s exterior characteristics (I have a male body, I have a female body).

Gender dysphoria is rare, yet I believe there are sound reasons to believe that it can be a real condition that exists apart from sexual experimentation, rebellion, or views of fluid sexuality often common in the transgender movement.¹⁵

Because the experience of gender dysphoria is completely foreign to people who do not face gender identity conflicts, it can be difficult to understand or even to regard with credibility. Gender coherence, or the absence of gender dysphoria, is so universally common that some people who are cynical about the existence of gender dysphoria make ungracious and demeaning quips like, “Just look down your pants – what more evidence do you need about whether you’re a man or a woman.” Therefore, some people suggest either that gender dysphoria is one more kind of mental confusion or that it is cultural capitulation, a caving to social ideology or influence. But I do not believe there is a one-size-fits-all explanation for gender dysphoria.

Regarding the first suggestion (it is mental confusion), research gathered and cited by Mark Yarhouse and magisterial Christian ethicist, Oliver O’Donovan, strongly suggests that the persistent condition of gender dysphoria is not delusion. According to their research, delusion usually manifests across a broad range of areas in life and personality, and usually that is not the case with gender dysphoria. Furthermore, people living with gender dysphoria are fully aware (painfully so) of the biological realities and the conflicts they experience.

The second suggestion (it is the result of influence) implies that gender dysphoria is a choice (perhaps the result of peer pressure or desire for sexual satisfaction), or the impact of early childhood abuse. Indeed, these influences may be contributing factors for some people. Consequently, these factors should be carefully and honestly explored, and not casually

¹³ Mark Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, 20.

¹⁴ I believe we should not regard the interior aspects of our whole being as immaterial or non-physical.

¹⁵ Genuine gender dysphoria is distinct from those forms of transsexualism motivated by delusion or sexual self-gratification.

dismissed. But there is no evidence that anyone *wants* to live with gender dysphoria. To the contrary there is consistent evidence that those who live with gender dysphoria will go to great lengths to relieve themselves of the pain and chaos that accompanies the conflict. While not every person with gender dysphoria experiences the conflict with the same level of intensity, the pain is commonly so great that many who experience gender dysphoria attempt suicide.¹⁶ Christian ethicist, Robert Song, describes gender dysphoria as "a body that is at war with itself."¹⁷

Although medical researchers continue to try to unravel the mystery of the conflict, they have unearthed no specific cause for gender dysphoria. The conflict often has early onset manifesting in childhood, sometimes as early as 3-5 years of age – this matches Chris’s story. In the majority of instances, according to case studies, the conflict dissipates or even disappears by age 18 (post puberty). This means that we (parents, counselors, pastors, doctors, etc. together) need to learn how to do everything possible to help conflicted pre-pubescent children wait and delay conclusions or interventions until it is clear that the conflict persists. In fact, influential social critic, Camille Paglia (a non-Christian who self-identifies as transgender) refers to pre-pubescent interventions as “child abuse” and “evil.”¹⁸ However, for those for whom the conflict persists, some report that they find some degree of relief by exploring a range of interventions from better understanding to surgery. More on these interventions below.

O’Donovan regards gender dysphoria as a “condition which has so far proved intransigent to every mode of psychiatric treatment.”¹⁹ It should be no surprise, then, that those with this condition may seriously consider a change of expression or a change of physiology to resolve the incongruity with their identity. In fact, "their very insistence in pursuing the hope of surgical intervention shows with what anguish they experience the dividedness of physical sexuality from gender identity."²⁰

Gender dysphoria, as a painful conflict or a distressing condition, like many results of the Fall we all experience, is worthy of sorrow, but is not in itself a sin that requires repentance.

Gender dysphoria involves conflicted *identity* and, as researchers have observed and those who experience the condition have testified, it frequently does not involve sexual *attraction*.

Gender dysphoria is not new. It is not an invention of the modern sexual revolution. There are historical and anthropological studies that identify cultures which recognize a middle or ambiguous sex,²¹ and theologians as far back as Augustine (345-440) affirm the existence of cases that share the characteristics of gender dysphoria. Note what Augustine observes in *The*

¹⁶ It is a widely accepted statistic that 41% of people with gender dysphoria attempt suicide.

¹⁷ Robert Song, *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 500.

¹⁸ Camille Paglia in a video excerpt from *The Battle of Ideas 2016*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8BRdwgPChQ

¹⁹ Oliver O’Donovan, “Transsexualism and Christian Marriage” *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 136

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 134.

²¹ See the works of Richard Winter, Megan DeFranza, or Gilbert Herdt for historical/anthropological evidence of a “third sex,” a category that includes but is not limited to gender dysphoria. I’m simply noting the presence of this category in anthropological studies, and I’m not advocating for the adoption of such a category.

City of God (16.8): "As for Androgynes, also called Hermaphrodites, they are certainly very rare, and yet it is difficult to find periods when there are no examples of human beings possessing the characteristics of both sexes, in such a way that it is a matter of doubt how they should be classified." Jesus himself, without commentary, acknowledges that there are some people who are "born eunuchs."²² That is, throughout human history, there have been born people who have lived with ambiguous or uncertain gender identities as well as sexual dysfunctions.

Gender dysphoria exists when the constituent elements of a person's sex, which usually work together coherently to define a person's sex, are in conflict with one another. "In its divided nature [the body has] become a sign of the fallen creation."²³

Now, at this point I need to acknowledge that there is a divergence of views about what defines a person's sex. Some Christians regard anatomy (genitalia, chromosomes) as the objective visible features which define a person's sex. These brothers and sisters regard anatomy as the orienting feature which determines how other discordant sexual components must resolve. This is a reasonable position, but is not a view I share. X's and Y's do not seem to answer all the questions manifest in the conflict. Jonathan Grant acknowledges that there are "confirmed aspects of male and female sexuality that go beyond our different bodies and reproductive capacities."²⁴ The view I share is that a person's sex is recognized by the coherence of those constituent elements in body and spirit²⁵ which comprise a person's sex. I believe that genuine gender dysphoria is possibly much like an intersex condition in which elements of both sexes *appear to be* present in the same person.

B. Three Analogies

Since most people have a difficult time understanding the experience of gender dysphoria, it may be helpful to note three analogies. Analogies are always incomplete, but they can be useful if we don't press them too far. Those who live with gender dysphoria may protest that what they experience is not like these analogies. Fair enough. However, even though they are limited, these analogies offer some insight and instruction for all of us. More importantly, they

²² Mt 19:20.

²³ Song, 500.

²⁴ Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex*, 97.

²⁵ Rob Smith, "Responding to the Transgender Revolution" (www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/responding-to-the-transgender-revolution), October 12, 2017 quoting John Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate*, 78. Smith affirms that sex is more than the body, but concludes that the spirit and body can never be at odds with each other. "Biological processes are not just functions of the body as distinct from the soul or spirit, and mental and spiritual capacities are not seated exclusively in the soul or spirit. All capacities and functions belong to the human being as a whole, a fleshly-spiritual totality.' In other words, scripture understands 'human beings holistically as single entities which are psychosomatic unities.' We are dealing, then, with a both-and: an ontological duality (a distinct body and soul) within a functional holism (an integrated person)." In my opinion, it's not at all clear how Smith's appeal to Ps 139 supports his claim that functional holism is an incorruptible aspect of humanness and sex. Smith concludes that "there is, then, no person or soul or spirit that has been created independently of the body and then placed in the body (or perhaps in the wrong body)." We agree in rejecting such a radical dualism. Nevertheless, while functional holism is nearly universally normative, we must acknowledge (and in fact be unsurprised) that the effects of the Fall may be far-reaching enough as to sometimes create a dysfunctional holism, a disruption of the integrity of sex and gender.

can evoke empathy and understanding for those of us who struggle to understand the experience of gender dysphoria. Jesus used many analogies to teach us about an unseen reality at the heart of his redemptive work: the kingdom of God. Hopefully, these analogies will offer some additional insight into the experience and condition of gender dysphoria, and the degree to which the Fall limits our ability to live fully as we were created.

1. Depression.

The first analogy is depression, a condition of the mind that impacts physiology – it's a disordered way of seeing self, God, and the world. Depression is a way of seeing the self that often persists in spite of what we know and believe. Depression also profoundly shapes and colors how one sees oneself engaging in relationships with other people and navigating the situations of life.

We note biblical characters who, while living by faith, show signs of significant depression: Elijah²⁶ and David²⁷ come to mind. Giants of church history have weathered long and grueling bouts of depression: C.H. Spurgeon and Martin Luther are two examples. In spite of their mature and well-informed faith, they would experience physically immobilizing and emotionally demoralizing seasons of depression. When in the grip of depression, they admitted their weakness and lived for that season within the limitations imposed by that weakness (e.g. when socializing proved suffocating, they would seek solitude).

For some people who live with depression, a clearer understanding of truth proves to be a re-ordering grace. For others, medicine or behavioral changes (recognizing triggers and patterns) prove to be a re-ordering grace. And, there are these who seek relief in prayer and are granted deliverance by God's grace. The analogy is imperfect, however, because the relationship (as best we can tell) of gender dysphoria to the mind and physiology is not the same as depression's influence of the mind over the body. But depression along with its physical, mental, and emotional impact is a way of seeing that may help us appreciate the character of gender dysphoria. For those living with gender dysphoria, the testimony of Christians who live with depression gives hope that the trouble that oppresses us does not have to enslave us – we do not need to live as people held hostage by the Fall and the conditions which plague us.

2. Acrophobia.

²⁶ From 1 Ki 19: ⁴Elijah “asked that he might die, saying, “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life.... ¹⁰I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.”

²⁷ From Ps 22: ¹“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? ²O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest.... ⁶I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. ⁷All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; ⁸“He trusts in the Lord; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!”... ¹⁴I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; ¹⁵my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death. ¹⁶For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet – ¹⁷I can count all my bones – they stare and gloat over me....”

The second analogy is acrophobia, fear of heights.²⁸ Imagine our trying to coax people with fear of heights up to a second floor balcony. Imagine taking them by the hand to lead them up the stairs. As their grip tightens on ours, we can feel with them the physical terror, legs locking up, sweat, heart palpitations, even hallucinations. If we pull hard enough, they may fight us and become desperate to get away to a safe place. We know that a physics lesson, or an explanation of how well-constructed the building is, does not always make the fear dissipate or be more manageable.

How then do we love faithfully someone who lives with such a fear? Is it not a loving accommodation to say to a person living with this fear, "I'll just stay on the first floor with you." Fear is another expression of brokenness in a Fallen world. There is no moral issue at stake with a fear of heights, but there is a similarity in how we respond pastorally to someone who experiences gender dysphoria. There is a similarity to the way a person with fear of heights looks at the second floor balcony and says "in a perfect world I should be able to, but I can't get there" and the way a person with genuine gender dysphoria looks at the creational ideal and says "in a perfect world I should be able to, but I can't get there." But the similarity goes further when we grasp the biblical view of the Fall. We all in various ways and to varying degrees live with limitations in our ability and desire to conform our lives to the creational ideal. While we live with hope that fear in this life can be resolved and abilities can be restored, we do not re-order the dis-order of a Fallen world solely by acts of the will.

3. Work

People were created to work, the third analogy. From the beginning, before sin dis-ordered the world, humans were to work in the world following the pattern of God's work in creation. So, it should not surprise us when Paul issues this command (and he explicitly calls it a command): "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat."²⁹ Paul has in mind vocational bread-earning work.

How, then, does someone who is sick or physically disabled respond to this imperative? How should the Christian community call a sister or brother with physical (body or mind) limitations to obey God's creational charge and Paul's Apostolic command? It is no disrespect to either the creational ideal or the Apostolic command to recognize actual physical limitations which are very real obstacles (sometimes humanly insurmountable) to doing and being what we have been created and called to do and be. Therefore, we do not expect people who live with physical limitations to live and work in the same way as people who are more physically whole. Nor do we interpret their inability as rebellion or indifference. At the same time, we do not ignore the creational goodness of work and the imperative to love (often expressed through work) as essential to our humanness and dignity as Divine image-bearers.

4. Learning from These Analogies.

²⁸ Really, any fear could serve the purpose here, but acrophobia is common enough to be familiar to many of us.

²⁹ 2 Th. 3:10.

For a person living with gender dysphoria, the example of Christians living faithfully and fruitfully even with great disabilities and significant disorder, can be a great encouragement. We've already mentioned Elijah, David, Martin Luther, and CH Spurgeon. In our own era, Nick Vujicic was born without any arms or legs. Joni Eareckson Tada suffered a spinal cord injury as a teenager and has lived her life since then as a quadriplegic. Theologian and seminary professor Richard Lovelace was a schizophrenic. Wesley Hill and Sam Allberry live with same-sex attraction. Yet all of these have served fruitfully and faithfully to the glory of God and for the good of their neighbors. Each of these, in their own ways, have chosen to say "no" to cultural voices that run counter God's creation and God's word, and they have learned to say "yes" to a life that strives to honor God even in the face of life realities they do not fully understand and cannot fully escape.

These analogies may help those of us who love friends living with gender dysphoria remember the very real limitations imposed on all humans as a result of the Fall. Also, the analogies may offer encouragement to those living with gender dysphoria by affirming that even when we find ourselves greatly limited by the results of the Fall, God is able to make our lives fruitful when we commit ourselves to being faithful to him in every way possible. Even though there are many ways the Fall may tempt us to feel trapped and helpless, gender dysphoria does not have the last word in answering the question, "Who am I?"

II. UNDERSTANDING OF & RESPONSE TO GENDER DYSPHORIA.

I am posing these questions in terms of pastoral care because I'm focusing on how we love, counsel, guide, and walk with those we love within our Christian community. This is a family conversation, not an ecclesiastical statement about the transgender movement. I leave that work to my betters.

As Christians committed to God's glory, our starting point is always God's creational design. We bow to his wisdom and will as he directs us by his word. But we bow as broken people. God promises to give us new hearts that love him and desire to do his will. Even still, our hearts are divided, disordered, and influenced by the old way of life. Are we not like Peter who, devastated by his betrayal of Jesus, confesses, "Yet, I love you, Lord."³⁰ Furthermore, we are broken of mind and body. These "dirt jars"³¹ truly bear God's image, yet they do not function as they should. In more ways than we are willing to admit, we cannot live as our first parents were created or as we will live resurrected in the world made new. Even at our most glorious, we hobble and improvise. As a result, in this life our path toward resurrection is varied and incomplete – the strong carry the weak, the courageous lead the fearful, the wise guide the foolish as together we work out our salvation with fear and trembling.³²

A. In living with a commitment to the goodness of God's creation, what do we affirm?

We begin with a commitment to the goodness of God's creation. This is God's own declaration of what he made, and we say "Amen" when we make these affirmations:

1. In the beginning God created humans male and female.³³ These two sexes, distinctly yet together, bear God's image³⁴, form society³⁵, and establish marriage.³⁶ Sex (the noun) is *who we are*: male and female. Gender is *how we live* in the ordained social constructs of image-bearing, societal formation, and marriage.³⁷ However, in popular culture, sex and gender have become reversed and indistinguishable so that gender now defines sex as a fluid socially constructed self-declaration. In the popular view the social dynamics of gender define sex, and sex is defined autonomously ("You can be whatever you want to be"). But this is contradictory to the biblical view in which gender is the social expression of sex.

³⁰ Jn 21:15ff.

³¹ 2 Cor 4:7.

³² Rom 15:1; 1 Cor 12:22-26; Phil 2:12.

³³ Gen 1:26-27; Mk 10:6 "From the beginning of creation God made them male and female."

³⁴ Gen 1:27 "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."

³⁵ Gen 1:28 "God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion..."; Gen 2:18 "the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.'"

³⁶ Gen 2:24 "a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

³⁷ I am using the term *sex* primarily as a noun to indicate the sexual identity of a person, not the sexual action of intercourse. I'm using *gender* to refer to the experience of being male and female in the context of image bearing, social formation, and marriage.

2. We are to honor our sex (being male and female) in the same way we are to honor marriage. Both sex and marriage are of the same order since their origin is in the explicit acts and decrees of the unspoiled creation.

3. We are to honor the sex we possess as well as the sex possessed by others because it is in and through the male/female distinction-in-community that God makes himself known in the world³⁸ and in the Church.³⁹

4. Cultural expressions that identify maleness and femaleness range widely. They are not necessarily right and wrong in themselves (some are, some aren't – we need to be discerning), and we must learn to reject lazy gender stereotypes (for instance: males are strong, like blue, and play with trucks while females are emotional, like pink, and play with dolls). But the ordained purpose of meaningful gendered cultural expressions is to distinguish maleness and femaleness, a distinction which is critical to applying biblical ethics for sexual behavior and to forming relationships. Therefore, the implication is that we are to use contemporary cultural forms to express clearly our sex and our sexed relationships (most critically, marriage). Paul refers to male and female hair styles in Corinth as situationally distinctive cultural indicators of sex and marital status in the order and worship of a local congregation in 1st Century Greece (1 Cor 11:2ff). While the primary intent of Dt 22:5 is to prohibit same-sex sexual behavior, it also prohibits falsely gendered sexual presentation for the purpose of sexual exploitation and sinful sexual behavior. A more detailed discussion of 1 Cor 11 and Dt 22 follow below.

5. Every person since Adam and Eve is fallen, and no person (except for Jesus) has ever experienced an uncorrupted or complete understanding and expression of sex. Because of God's covenant with Noah,⁴⁰ we can live with the expectation of substantial order in the world. The rhythm of seasons and the regularity of the physical universe assure us that, in spite of humanly irreparable dis-order, God's preservation of the world allows all people to experience significant continuity within his creation. But we inescapably experience this simultaneous order and dis-order in many different ways including sex.

6. While we all certainly have more to learn on this point, I believe that a person's essential or ontological sex is unalterable. When God made Adam and Eve human, he also made them male and female. Even when a coherent unity of the constituent parts that work together to comprise and reveal a person's sex is absent (thereby leaving that person uncertain about his/her ontological sex), that ontological sex still exists and cannot be changed.⁴¹ In our

³⁸ Gen 1:26.

³⁹ Eph 5:32.

⁴⁰ Gen 8:22.

⁴¹ Christian ethicist, Oliver O'Donovan, suggests that "biological characteristics [most definitively, chromosomal characteristics] are not merely isolated constituents in the totality of a person's sexuality, but themselves comprise a totality which determine what a person's sex is whenever it matters to be precise about it" ("Transsexualism and Marriage," 144). These characteristics cannot be altered, and I believe it's important to recognize that fact. O'Donovan has in mind that chromosomal data will be most useful to parents determining the sex of an intersex infant. But, more relevant to a person living with gender dysphoria, he's acknowledging that there are some aspects of what define us sexually that are beyond our reach to control or our ability to change. As such they endure as critical pieces that contribute to a person's sex. Therein, too, lies part of the conflict at the heart of gender dysphoria – significant foundational dimensions of sex seem to persist in fierce opposition to a person's living with

age of increasing scientific and technological manipulation of the human body, I believe it's important to affirm that there are some aspects of what define us sexually that are beyond our reach to control or our ability to change. As such they endure as critical fixed pieces that contribute to gender identity. Thus, given the role of unalterable and inaccessible characteristics, any attempt to move from an incoherent toward a coherent ontological sex will always be limited and incomplete.

Chris and I disagree about this point. He is more optimistic that changes toward coherence actually establish gender identity. I am not convinced. I believe it is important to affirm that sexual ontology is not something we can manipulate – there are aspects of our sex which are beyond our reach and ability to control. We can no more change our sex than we can change our species. However, I very cautiously believe that therapeutic interventions may possibly enable a person to live more coherently with one's ontological sex. I make that allowance fully aware that those who define gender identity based exclusively on genitalia and chromosomes will disagree with my allowance for this possibility.

7. Because God created us as embodied beings, sex, too, is an embodied dimension of who we are. Therefore, even if a person experiences gender dysphoria, a person's physiological sex is the basis for biblical ethics for sexual behavior and for directing embodied sexual behavior and relationships.⁴²

B. How do we place our understanding of gender dysphoria within the comprehensive call to Christian faithfulness?

Recognizing gender dysphoria as a condition does not mean that we are helpless or hopeless. The acknowledgement of condition is not resignation, nor is it an assumption that we can do nothing. God is always and everywhere present in the fullness of his redemptive power and purpose. How then do we live?⁴³

- We are to live with humility and commitment to the goodness of God's creation.

sexual coherence. Thus, given the role of unalterable characteristics, any attempt to move toward a coherent ontological sex will always be limited and incomplete.

⁴² Biblical sexual ethics direct embodied actions which assume the identification and complementarity of male and female physiology in marital sexual union and in the physiological act of procreation (1 Cor 7:3-4). In the case of someone living with gender dysphoria, we take seriously both that person's physiology as well as his/her internal sense of sex. But it makes the application of biblical ethics more complex. Take for instance the case of a physiological male living with gender dysphoria who would be free, based only on physiology, to marry a physiological female. However, the Bible's directive that sexual expression must preserve gender complementarity would forbid that same physiological male from expressing a female identity within a sexual or marital relationship with a physiological female. It seems consistent to apply biblical ethics relative to that person's internal sense of sex in the same way as, and concurrent with, that person's physiological sex. The implication, therefore, for someone living with gender dysphoria and with a commitment to biblical sexual ethics, is likely a commitment to singleness, a commitment that would be wise to work out in seasoned Christian community and in close dialogue with a mature spiritual director or pastor.

⁴³ I am following Yarhouse's three contrasting and overlapping frameworks: the integrity framework, the disability framework, and the diversity framework (Yarhouse, 52).

- We are to live with compassion and courage in the face of the limitations of our brokenness.
- We are to live with grace and patience as we struggle to work out the tension between commitment and limitations.

1. We live with humility and commitment to the goodness of God's creation.

We take creation seriously, and we live by *faith*. Maleness and femaleness are essential to humanness in God's good creation, and sex informs many of the ethical commands in God's word. We are to honor these as God's design for us and our relationships. Bending our lives to the arc of God's will can be hard and frequently requires cross-bearing sacrifice and courage. But the Spirit, by his indwelling power, helps us understand God's design as well as order our lives for his glory and our good. Perhaps most relevant to this conversation is the place of maintaining clear gender distinctions in the economy of God's providence.⁴⁴

2. We live with tenderness and compassion in the face of the limitations of our brokenness.

We take the *Fall* seriously, and we *love*. We live in a broken world as broken people. Every one of us is broken in ways that are sometimes obvious and sometimes not obvious. In some dimensions of brokenness, we experience, by God's grace, substantial healing. In many dimensions, we suffer and endure disabilities we cannot change so that, by God's grace, we wait for transformation in the world made new. In addition to God's word, we look to God's world (his common grace) for help in bringing some coherence, healing, and relief to the persistent disorder of the world. These efforts to bring order and relief, while real and meaningful, are always partial and imperfect – we lean hard on God's grace to sustain us through a life marked by suffering at every turn. While we are always to live with God's creational goodness in view, we admit that no efforts in this life to undo our fallenness are fully successful in restoring the creational ideal. We cannot escape the brokenness of life.

3. We live with grace and patience as we struggle to work out the tension between the Fall and Resurrection.

We take Redemption seriously, and we wait with *hope*. That is, we live between Christ's Resurrection and return, between the promise and fulfillment. Redemption is a certainty even though we experience profound and sometimes terrifying uncertainty as we live through the

⁴⁴ Each person has an embodied ontological sex because sex is essential to humanness. To be human is to possess a sex, even in those instances (e.g. intersex conditions) in which physiological evidence does not clearly identify that sex. Image-bearing and faithfulness to biblical ethics related to sexual behavior rely on the clear, unambiguous presentation and recognition of sex. We are not to lie to one another and pretend to be something we are not, and this prohibition includes our sex. The Song of Solomon doesn't make any sense apart from the premise that for sexual marital love to be possible each person must know his/her own sex and have the capacity to recognize the sex of the person to whom he/she is attracted (this is true for same- as well as opposite-sex attractions).

process of being redeemed. We are not yet what we will be.⁴⁵ As a result we live in tension between the concurrent realities of redemption and brokenness.

Central to living in that sometimes chaotic and confusing tension of a world longing for completion is our need for belonging to community. It is in community that we make sense of ourselves and the world. In community we belong to something more than ourselves that gives shape, meaning, and purpose to identity and life. Groups centered on a particular affinity (like Alcoholics Anonymous, veterans, cancer survivors, as well gender identity groups) offer the security of community by saying: “you belong because you’re just like us.” Indeed, such communities are often enriching to our lives. By contrast Christian community offers the security of community by saying: “you belong because none of us is like Jesus – none of us is what we should be or will be, and all of us are desperately dependent on grace and mercy.” Each of us enters Christian community confessing our brokenness, and each of us remains in Christian community with the hope that God’s presence, power, and providence will shape how we live together toward resurrection.

In Christian community we live with simultaneous commitments to being faithful to biblical truth and ethics and to living patiently and lovingly with the unresolved brokenness and chaos that we experience in our lives. In a profound sense that we will never fully grasp in this life, our brokenness and incompleteness are gifts to the community even as God through the community graciously delivers wisdom, joy, strength, and courage to those who suffer. Specifically, Chris is a gift, a bearer of grace to brothers and sisters who offer grace in return that together we might learn to live together before the face of God. Beyond conformity to what God has made clear, the path of living through that tension often will look as different as the people who make up the community into which God has called us to live.

C. How can we summarize this Creation-Fall-Redemption-Glorification perspective? Through what lens can we view our experience and make sense of our brokenness?

Again, I am leaning on the analysis and tri-focal framework suggested by Mark Yarhouse as a context for pastoral care.

Diversity

Much of the culture around us places a high value on autonomy and independence. In the name of diversity, individuals pride themselves in doing what is right in their own eyes, in being “true to themselves,” in being authentic, and in rejecting any notion of creational intent.⁴⁶ “For many people today, to set aside their own path in order to conform to some external authority just doesn’t seem comprehensible as a form of spiritual life. The injunction is... ‘Only

⁴⁵ 1 Jn 3:2; Rom 8:19ff; 1 Cor 13:12; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:4.

⁴⁶ When I refer to “creational intent,” or in some places “creational order,” I mean God’s creation of male and female as binary ontologies that exist distinctly yet in community. Since the Fall, we experience many distortions to those ontologies, but I hold the view that the male/female paradigm from creation remains in place though broken. By “order” I am not referring to any sort of male/female hierarchy within marriage, the Church, or society.

accept what rings true to your own inner self.”⁴⁷ As a result it is easy to reject any notion of the binary male/female paradigm rooted in creation.

However, diversity also keeps in view the individual nature of our life circumstances and the way sanctification gets worked out in our lives. Living faithfully requires an attentiveness to the distinctive aspects of our personal make up and our life circumstances. God’s grace unfolds in individual lives so that we each have our own story to tell of how the Lord changes and sustains us, and we can find community with others whose similar stories offer us insight and camaraderie.

Disability

C.S. Lewis opens *Mere Christianity* by observing the nearly universal awareness that things are not the way they are supposed to be. We all experience the impact of the Fall both globally and personally in forms that include disease and disability. Those who suffer with gender dysphoria are only one of the more visible examples of how we all live with some form of topsy-turvy brokenness. Even those parts of our being that we are tempted to call “normal” are damaged in ways that can be difficult to see.

Many in the culture around us as well as in the Church confront the brokenness of life predominantly by means of compassion. We hurt with those who hurt. However, in the name of love, too many of us give each other permission to make choices based solely on personal fulfillment, healing, and happiness.

But, our disabilities, by God’s design, serve to drive us to God’s ability, his grace and providence. We cast our cares upon him⁴⁸ and trust him for grace to change and heal us or grace to sustain us when our disabilities persist.⁴⁹ When we view our disabilities through the lens of God’s providence, knowing the compassionate heart of our Father, we choose in love to live for God’s glory whether or not we experience deliverance from our disabilities. Living faithfully means that we resist the temptation to look at God and ourselves through the lens of our disabilities. Such a perspective inevitably leads to measuring God’s trustworthiness by our happiness.

Duty

One of the hallmarks of historic Christianity is fidelity to God’s word. As Christians we believe in obedience as a life of love for the God we serve. Jesus’ prayer in the Garden was surely a prayer he uttered every day of his life: “Not my will, but may your will be done.”⁵⁰ Do we not desire for this prayer to flow from our heart every day as well. So, when it comes to choices

⁴⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 489.

⁴⁸ 1 Pet 5:7.

⁴⁹ 2 Cor 12:7-10.

⁵⁰ Lk 22:42.

related to our gender identity, we conform ourselves to God's law even as we are transformed into Christlikeness by the Spirit of Christ.

However, God does not speak with uniform clarity about every situation of life. In areas in which the scriptures are less explicit we must proceed carefully, determined to affirm what God's word says, no more, no less. As I've already noted, there are important affirmations God makes that influence our understanding of and response to gender dysphoria. But because many questions remain unanswered, we must guard against an over-confident legalistic spirit as well as an uncritical indifference.

Many Christians respond to the troubles of life simply by listing God's rules. In the name of duty, some Christians insist that our only response to brokenness is conformity to obligations. Even many non-Christians operate with heavily loaded formulistic language of what we must say, do, or allow. Indeed, we are bound to obey what God has made clear. But as we continue to learn more and more about the world and every area of life, here, too, we must be patient as we *act in faith* on what we know and as we *wait in faith* for what we do not know.

Integration

If we leave diversity, disability, and duty as compartmentalized responses, we will obscure our need to keep the whole redemptive picture (Creation, Fall, Redemption, Glorification) simultaneously and constantly in view. This means that for exceptionally difficult situations in life, like gender dysphoria, the best response we can offer is not individually to honor duty, disability, or diversity (or, truth, compassion, and wisdom). Rather, we must practice and learn together in Christian community to inhabit the biblical tri-focal paradigm of faith, love, and hope.

Adopting this tri-focal approach (the integrity, disability, and diversity frameworks suggested by Yarhouse – or, to use biblical terms: faith, love, and hope) means that not all our questions get answered with the clarity we would like. As Evangelicals who affirm the authority of all God teaches in his word, it can feel like equivocation to say “yes, but, gender dysphoria is a disability.” Nevertheless, our life before the face of God cannot be reduced simply to duty and compliance, even though there are certainly many times when the life that honors God requires death, sacrifice, and gritty obedience. Some Christians insist that we have no option other than conforming our lives to the creational order as revealed in our anatomy, and for them it feels like the “disability” category creates a loophole exception that allows a person to skirt ethical responsibility and to justify choices based on feelings.⁵¹ However, I believe that such a view does not give proper weight to the condition and effects of the Fall as they are described in the Bible. In other words, the tension between duty and disability exists within the Scriptures themselves and gets worked out in life through the diversity of the community of grace.

⁵¹ For some Christians the objection to gender dysphoria's being a condition comes more from dis-ease and the feeling of discomfort about the subject. Others believe that genetic and/or physiological markers infallibly define a person's sex.

The matter of gender dysphoria being a condition merits further elaboration which I offer in section three. For now, allow me simply to affirm that I find the existence of such a condition to be wholly compatible with the biblical view of the Fall and its results, and I'm writing with that assumption. But some people do not agree. For that reason, we'll look more carefully at the relationship of sex, gender, and body to discern whether or not there is biblical warrant to believe that gender dysphoria can be a condition.

D. How then does a person live with brokenness like gender dysphoria in a way that trusts God and his providence and honors what God intends sex (maleness and femaleness) to be?

Before going further, I believe it is important to recognize that within the transgender movement, people pursue change for many reasons. In the spirit of the sexual revolution some people want to throw off any sort of boundaries and restraints so that they can live the way they want to live. Such a posture, from the Christian perspective, would be one of the many expressions of human rebellion. Some are motivated by sexual desire. But I am focusing on those people who live with the conflict of gender dysphoria and are seeking wholeness.⁵²

Let's consider five possible ways in which a person might seek a resolving or easing of the pain and incongruity of gender dysphoria. I want to evaluate each of these options both in the context of living *by faith* in the Triune God as well as in the context of living *in response to* God as we struggle together to live faithfully as followers of Jesus.

- *A Prayer for Divine Intervention:* this is asking for God's healing grace. We pray, and we entrust our brokenness to God's mercy, with the hope that he will resolve the pain and incongruity by his own power. Prayer will be a constant regardless of what other combination of options a person pursues in an effort to find a measure of relief that makes the conflict manageable.
- *A Change of Thinking:* this is changing how one thinks of one's self and identity both creationally and sexually. Sometimes a better understanding of God, the gospel, one's self, or the condition of gender dysphoria is enough of a gentle rain to damp down the dust thereby enabling the person with gender dysphoria to breathe and find relief.
- *A Change of Influence:* this is changing how one relates to significant situational influences. The goal is to reduce or remove environmental factors that may otherwise intensify or feed on the root conflict.

⁵² Dr. John McHugh, a pioneer in sex-change surgeries at Johns Hopkins, now repudiates such surgeries. Given his important involvement in sex-reassignment surgeries (as they were known at the time), it is understandable that many people would rely on his opinions about transgender issues. Some of his opinions are correct. But with all due respect to his medical experience, his assessment of why people pursue sex-change surgeries. This erroneous motivational assessment is foundational to his commentary, and therefore it undermines the usefulness and reliability of his conclusions. In his opinion, in his practice, there were two groups of people who desired sex-change surgery: "One group consisted of conflicted and guilt-ridden homosexual men who saw a sex-change as a way to resolve their conflicts over homosexuality by allowing them to behave sexually as females with men. The other group, mostly older men, consisted of heterosexual (and some bisexual) males who found intense sexual arousal in cross-dressing as females" (www.firstthings.com/article/2004/11/surgical-sex). But his categories simply do not correspond to the testimony of people living with gender dysphoria and looking for relief. His assumptions about the reasons people experiencing gender dysphoria might seek surgical intervention distort the lens through which he views gender dysphoria and the remedies people pursue to relieve the conflict.

- *A Change of Expression*: this is changing how one presents oneself so as to identify with the sex opposite to one's physiological sex (through name and/or pronoun change or change of dress).
- *A Change of Physiology*: this is changing the physical characteristics of one's body through some combination of hormone treatment or surgery.

1. A Prayer for Divine Intervention

Our life as Christians is the life-long process of entrusting ourselves, body and soul, to God's omnipotent love and grace. God invites us to cast all our cares on him because he cares for us.⁵³ But prayer is not some magic incantation to "pray the gay away," to borrow an expression that criticizes a mechanical or formulaistic view of prayer. An honest review of biblical and Church history leads us to recognize that divine deliverance, while always possible and sometimes astonishing, is not the norm. The promise of God is first to be with us always as One who suffers with us as our all-sufficient Saviour. He is the Good Shepherd who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death.⁵⁴ For that reason, we dare to ask boldly⁵⁵ – we have a great God, and we should dare to ask great things of him even while remembering that his grace that delivers is no greater than his grace that sustains. He declares, "I am the Lord, the God of all living things! Is anything too hard for me?"⁵⁶ Of course, the answer is, "No, nothing is too hard for him."⁵⁷

God can heal us and change the most impossible circumstances of life, and we should not be shy about asking him to do so.⁵⁸ But as Christ yielded to the Father's unwillingness to intervene in the hour of his deepest humiliation and suffering,⁵⁹ he models for us how we are to live, entrusting our lives to God's providence and learning to value the Father's sovereign purpose more than our own deliverance from trouble. Paul yields to God's providence after petitioning God three times to remove his "thorn." God's explanation to Paul is crucial for each of us to believe in the face of our painful and insurmountable struggles: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul's commitment to this perspective on suffering and hardship challenges our assumption that deliverance from our struggles is the higher ground of Christian living and is the path to a more fulfilling life.⁶⁰ Honest, earnest, and

⁵³ 1 Pet 5:7.

⁵⁴ Ps 23:4.

⁵⁵ Heb 4:16 "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

⁵⁶ Jer 32:27.

⁵⁷ Jer 32:17.

⁵⁸ 1 Sam 1:9-18; Lk 18:1-8.

⁵⁹ Mt 26:36-43 which includes Jesus' prayer also recorded by Luke: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Lk 22:42). Job, too, prays in his suffering, much like Jesus.

⁶⁰ For Paul physical difficulties due to personal limitations, deficiencies, illness, and any form of human inadequacy or brokenness are just as real and crushing as any hardship imposed by spiritual conflict or opposition to the gospel. Paul is assuring us that God promises sustaining grace for all the troubles we experience in this life. "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:7-10).

persistent prayer, in affirming God's greatness, compassion, and presence, guards us from diminishing his character as we persist in praying our way through life's most grueling struggles.

The promise of God is also to complete us, to finish what he started.⁶¹ Prayers that rise like smoke from the burning conflicts of life often tempt us to locate and limit the answer to our prayers to the resolution of the present difficulty in this life. But the promise of God's constant presence is not merely for companionship and encouragement. His presence also means he is at work right now wherever he is present. He not only accompanies us throughout our lives, but he is also at work in all the circumstances of life, even in our bodies, minds, and sex. All these things are tools which he uses to complete his redemptive purpose for us.⁶²

Because of Jesus' resurrection, we can be confident that God's completing purpose for us will not fail -- this is our comfort and hope. We also live believing his promise that we, too, shall be raised with bodies made glorious and incorruptible. When we see Jesus, we will be like him.⁶³ In this life, none of us is free from the brokenness, sorrow, and conflict of life in a Fallen world. No healing in this life can remove the curse which plagues our lives. Yet we are able to endure with joy knowing that our Lord is making us new along with every part of creation.⁶⁴ We may dare to live with courage, even while struggling with great adversity, because as those who trust our resurrected Lord we know how our story ends. It ends in glory and *shalom*, wholeness and completion, and we choose to wait for it with patience and perseverance.⁶⁵

2. A Change of Thinking

How we think about ourselves, God, and our life circumstances profoundly shapes how we navigate the conditions of life and how we live into the redemptive narrative. Those thoughts and ideas which inform our beliefs, attitudes, and choices, come from a wide array of sources: Christian and non-Christian friends, parents, the Scriptures, sermons, Church teaching, the internet, novels, articles, social media, affinity groups, and more, with varying authority, credibility, and reliability. In the hands of the Spirit, God's truth makes us willing to renew and order our minds to see all of life as worship, and God's character (his mercy) makes us willing to present our bodies as a living sacrifice.⁶⁶ The Spirit redirects the flow of our lives so that a change of thinking opens up another way for us to tell our stories.

By "a change of thinking" I'm not suggesting a kind of fairy-tale denial of reality. I'm not suggesting that if you "tap your heels together three times and think to yourself, 'There's no place like home,'" that suddenly you'll find your circumstance transformed. But, it's true that what we think and how we hold ideas shape our perspective on life. If I believe God is a bully, then I will tend to walk through life terrified that he's going to jump out from behind a bush to

⁶¹ Phil 1:6; 1 Thes 5:23-24.

⁶² Rom 8:28.

⁶³ 1 Cor 15:51ff; 1 John 3:2.

⁶⁴ Rev 22:5 "these words are faithful and true."

⁶⁵ Rom 8:25.

⁶⁶ Rom 12:1-2

terrorize me. If I believe God is immense and omnipotent, then I will tend to walk through life believing that all things, no matter how great and unconquerable they seem to me, are in fact smaller than him and subject to his control.

As we continue to learn about ourselves, God, our situations, and the resources available to us, we expect our perspective to mature as we learn to live into the richness of the gospel narrative that is ours in Christ. That is, we begin to recognize with greater clarity that God is everywhere present and everywhere at work even in the midst of all that is upside down in this world. If God's grace is at work in weakness, we begin to recognize that our disabilities and brokenness are gifts integral to our worship – they are valuable to our life together in Christian community and in our mission to make Christ known in the world. While we continue to pray for God's healing, we discover that it is from a position of weakness that a person living with gender dysphoria learns it is possible to live all of life to the glory of God.

At the same time, in the case of gender dysphoria, a change of thinking doesn't mean that the sexual incongruity is eliminated. However, it is possible for a growth in understanding to reshape how a person experiences that incongruity. We learn how to apply and depend upon God's grace in the circumstances and conditions of life. For instance, we learn to live with loneliness, death, cancer, injustice, and situations we cannot fix or control. We learn to appropriate the reality of an identity grounded "in Christ." We learn more about our bodies (physically and mentally) and the conditions which trouble our lives. The content of this understanding comes from the truth God has disclosed in his word and in the knowledge available through common grace. Very often when we learn more about the things in life which frighten and terrorize us, we see our relationship to those things differently. Every person who lives with the brokenness of this world, both in body and circumstance, is promised "grace to help," and that gracious help may be in the form of understanding, a way of learning to be more at peace with the very real and enduring hardships of life.⁶⁷

Christians are not the only people who are shaped by the ideas they embrace – that is, by their way of thinking. Every person lives with core beliefs that form a foundation for living. In the larger conversation of gender identity, some people adopt the belief that gender norms are completely fluid and irrelevant. It's likely that a person who holds that belief will find it challenging to be accommodating to someone who affirms the existence of gender norms. Or,

⁶⁷ It is the nature of new life in Christ for us to change, to mature particularly in our understanding and thinking as well as in our behavior. In the normal progress of spiritual maturity, the Spirit of God provides us with understanding that informs our choices that reflect our new life in Christ. As Paul charges each of us in Romans 12:1-2, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may be able to test and discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and mature." The Spirit at work in us personally and among us through our shared life in community not only brings us to faith but also continues God's work of grace to teach us, guide us, and transform us (Eph 4:20-24). The Spirit liberates us from the old way of life, sustains us through the brokenness of life, and assures us that "this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Cor 4:17-18). Therefore, "we do not lose heart" (2 Cor 4:16) in this life even when we do not attain the understanding or experience the transformation for which we hope. Or, even when that "light momentary affliction" seems like an unbearable burden that is crushing the life out of us.

by contrast some people insist that physiology (genitalia) is an inviolable indicator of a person's sex. It's likely that a person who holds that belief will find it challenging to be accommodating to someone who believes that a person's sex is defined by more than anatomy.

Not only does our perspective change as we learn, but our behavior also changes as we are pulled more strongly into the currents of the gospel. As we put into practice the biblical truths we believe and understand, our faith deepens and our knowledge expands. The principle here is not that faith and knowledge overcome disabilities, but our attitude toward and our practices around those disabilities are reshaped as the things we are able to do become more richly informed by our conformity to the will of God. Our story is being simultaneously enveloped by and enriched in Christ's story.

One way we push back against the pressure of popular culture is learning to think of ourselves less as autonomous individuals and more as members of community. This is true for all people as image-bearers created for community. But more particularly, as Christians, we learn to think of ourselves as members of the Body of Christ. Community is the context for thinking and learning as well as practice, behavior which in turn shapes our faith and understanding. As followers of Christ we learn to look to Christian community for the grace God has promised. In that fellowship we trust God, and we entrust ourselves to those charged to hold out the hope of the gospel. Furthermore, as a community we learn to accept the responsibility to *be* that grace-filled community and live as agents of peace. So, if a change of thinking is to bring any healing grace, Christians who struggle with identity need to know they belong both to God and to his people. The community of grace in turn must affirm that all who struggle are welcome so that together as a community we may wrestle deeply with what it means to live all of life to the glory of God.

3. A Change of Influence

"The things we are able to do" is a phrase I just used. In the complex experience of gender dysphoria are we able to improve the environment in which we struggle even if the core conflict persists? Yes, I believe we can. I believe, too, that the ability to do so is part of God's gracious provision. These are the things we are able to do.

It's easy to fall into the false all-or-nothing trap when we feel overwhelmed. It's easy to become passively submissive or resigned when we are faced with an enormous and seemingly unconquerable challenge. When we become weary and worn out, it's easy to throw up our hands believing there is nothing we can do to make a difference. Given the strong self-affirming influences of our culture, it's easy be persuaded by those voices and yield our wills to those currents.

The "Serenity Prayer" authored by Reinhold Niebuhr and used widely by Alcoholics Anonymous, is a petition asking God to help us make an important distinction. You may know the prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." It's a simple but wise request. Lord, help me to

identify what I have the ability to do and the courage to admit what I don't have the ability to do. The good sense of the prayer applies to many areas of life, including the struggle to know what to do in the quest for relief from gender dysphoria. Lord, help me to know the difference between what I can and what I can't do. Teach me to live wisely between the two poles of omnipotence (I can do everything) and helplessness (I can do nothing).⁶⁸

As we navigate our way through the many complicated situations of life, we gain poise by learning to distinguish what we can and can't do. Life situations and conflicts are layered and multi-dimensional, and as we mature and grow in faith, we learn to assign elements of a situation the appropriate weight each is due. We all know people for whom every little thing is an apocalyptic crisis. While the intense conflict of gender dysphoria is not trivial in any way, it's understandable that the many dimensions of that experience can blur together and seem to be all equally overwhelming, important, and impossible. But they are not all equal either in significance and difficulty. Nor are all the components of what we face inextricable from the whole.

So these more secondary factors, if addressed, while not resolving the root of the conflict, can change the environment in which the conflict of gender dysphoria is experienced. While of very real concern in themselves, I tend to think of these factors as noise surrounding the primary conflict like clouds socked in around Mt Ranier (if you've ever been to Seattle).

Confusion can trigger all kinds of reactions and responses within us: anxiety that leads to eating disorders, a desperation that leads to cutting and opens the door to suicide. So, attending to surrounding situational concerns can help us cut through the noise to focus on what's at the heart of the conflict. For instance, self-loathing and fear, which often flourish in isolation, can be countered by love and affirmation expressed in community. Therefore, a move toward Christian community may make relational and spiritual resources more accessible thereby strengthening a sense of belonging and hope thereby lightening the burden of the dysphoria. I've already noted the impact that rehearsing and affirming the truth of the gospel can have upon our minds for the power and hope of the gospel to soak down into our souls: "I am with you always; I will never leave you or forsake you," says our God.⁶⁹ You bear the image of God. You are the beloved of God, precious in his eyes and heart.⁷⁰ If we can be confident of God's loyal presence in every circumstance, the threats we face have one less weapon with which to terrorize us. If we are certain that nothing has the power to separate us from the love of God in Christ,⁷¹ the crisis we face can no longer threaten us with the fear of God's abandonment or betrayal.

In addition to the messages to which we give audience and credibility, we can be discerning about the influence of friendships we cultivate or tolerate; of books, music, art, and films we allow to stimulate our imagination and senses; of the foods we eat that nourish or debilitate

⁶⁸ "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10). "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:10).

⁶⁹ Mt 28:20; Heb 13:5.

⁷⁰ Ps 139:44; Is 43:4; Eph 4:24.

⁷¹ Rom 8:38-39.

our health; of devotional practices and worship that nurture our faith and character; of light and space that shape our living environment; of physical exercise and rest.

Attending to those variables within our reach can possibly prevent additional conflict from piling onto the root conflict thereby making it all the more difficult to reach. To the extent we can clear the deck of obstacles which obscure our perception, understanding, and experience of the root conflict, the more we can make adjustments and decisions that more directly impact the conflict that seems insurmountable.

What happens when we mistake the noise for the more important conflict being masked by the noise? Here's an example. Acceptance is critical to the gospel and to trusted relationships. But if a person living with gender dysphoria makes acceptance the primary goal, or the standard by which he/she measures resolution, the heart of the more essential conflict becomes obscured. A secondary goal (important as it is) has replaced the primary goal, and the path to resolution has been diverted or made more difficult and confusing. At the same time, establishing an environment in which the person struggling with gender dysphoria no longer lives in fear of rejection, significantly diminishes or even removes that obstacle from the landscape. Think about the influence that diet, sleep, prayer, and music have on the way we evaluate and confront our problems. Perhaps you've heard the expression "things will look better in the morning." It's the simple wisdom that a good night's sleep really does change our attitude toward the conflicts we face – sleep doesn't make the problem go away, but it can change how we tackle the troubles of life today.⁷²

When we live with intense pain and persistent conflict, we begin to experience the powerful gravitational pull toward a life focused on self. The conflict sucks us into believing that I am my pain. That pull is reinforced by the secular cultural liturgies that envelope us, order reality, and prioritize our beliefs. That gravity pulls other issues into orbit around the self. But as men and women learning to follow Christ, "the whole point of 'liturgical lines and rituals' [in Christian community] is to create 'a powerful environment of God-centeredness.'"⁷³ The formative liturgies recommended by James K.A. Smith help us cut through the noise and the distraction, both those that bombard us from without and those that choke us from within. "Given the powerful influence of our social contexts in shaping our identity, we should seek to live in the right context. Christians, then, can cultivate a constructive view of freedom, whereby we are becoming conformed to the image of Christ within a committed community through disciplined habits, practices, and rituals."⁷⁴ Or, as Richard Rohr puts it, we don't "think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking."⁷⁵

The significance of these liturgies for this conversation about gender dysphoria is that they remind us of those areas of life in which we can actively and responsibly participate. As mere mortals, much of life is beyond our control. That includes those areas of deep brokenness that

⁷² Ps 104:15; 1 Tim 5:23.

⁷³ Smith, James K.A., *You Are What You Love*, Kindle 1134.

⁷⁴ Grant, 4334.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Grant, 4229.

elude our grasp. While the awareness of our limitations can drive us to our all powerful God, liturgies remind us of how God has enabled us to participate in his grace at work in our lives. If we succumb to the perception that the painful chaos of gender dysphoria controls every part of our lives, we will almost certainly despair and give up hope.

4. A Change of Expression

May we and those who live with gender dysphoria view changes of expression or presentation⁷⁶ as therapeutic options which do not run counter to biblical ethics? Possibly. However, while biblical teaching on these matters is not explicit, there are some relevant principles to keep in view and that give us direction.

Having created us male and female, God also established a creational framework in which we are to express our maleness and femaleness in a way that is consistent with our sex. But since the Fall, conditions like gender dysphoria are examples of a dis-ordered creation. Therefore, with regard to gender dysphoria, it's important to recognize that a person's attempt to restore order is not necessarily an act of willful disregard or rejection of one's physiological sex. We may view with compassion such efforts to restore order and find relief.

If the person with gender dysphoria is not given relief in response to prayer and is unsuccessful in finding relief through a change of thinking, is it fruitful or frustrating to continue to press for cognitive reorientation or to hope exclusively in divine deliverance? In lives not afflicted with this condition, we expect people to possess the cognitive ability to conform their lives to the creational framework of biblical sexuality (e.g. anger, covetousness, sexual desire) as an act of the will. But to what degree do we make allowances for those persons whose condition significantly impairs their ability to conform? What do we say to a person who chooses to change his/her name or pronoun or who chooses to dress *toward* or dress *as* the other sex?⁷⁷

One response that seems appropriate given these factors is to say: While we admit that we do not fully understand the condition, and while we recognize that a change of expression does not seem to follow the creational norm (a norm which brings with it ethical biblical responsibility that we do not dismiss because of brokenness and disability), we welcome you into our lives by choosing to acknowledge you as you wish to be known.

Welcoming into our lives a person, as he/she presents him/herself, may be regarded as a fundamental act of Christlike charity. God loves us, and Jesus stepped into the world and steps into people's lives as we are, not as we should be or could be or would be. Jesus steps into our lives to begin the process of change here and now, sanctification that results in an embodied Christ-like glory when we see him face to face.⁷⁸ So with great joy we note that many people

⁷⁶ Changes of expression include change of name, change of pronoun, dressing *toward* the opposite sex, dressing *as* the opposite sex.

⁷⁷ For a more detailed commentary on cross-dressing, see the discussion of Dt 22 and 1 Cor 11 on page 25.

⁷⁸ 1 Jn 3:2.

who met Jesus in the Gospels came away from their encounter changed – by his omnipotent grace some experienced a change of mind, will, or affections; some were given life; some were delivered from demonic influence; and still others received a change of body. When we welcome a person into Christian community, that person encounters Christ just as truly as did the woman at the well.⁷⁹ While the grace of God that delivered the Gerasene man from the legion of demons⁸⁰ is no less powerful today, we observe that God most commonly uses his power to *sustain us in* rather than *deliver us from* our physical brokenness. But it's important to remember that God's grace, whether it delivers or sustains, is always transforming grace.⁸¹

I noted earlier that I have chosen to address Chris as “he,” and I'm aware that not all Christians will agree with me about this decision. But I've decided to recognize Chris as male, not as an ontological declaration about a situation clouded by anguished uncertainty, and not as an ethical truth statement, but as a simple recognition of my friend as he wants to be known. It is an accommodation of love for my friend and a commitment to using situationally sensitive language.⁸² Chris is now known to his larger world as male, and many people now know him only as Chris (and have never known him any differently). I have occasion to meet Chris's friends (including those he invites to church), and for their sake I honor his desire to be known as male. Perhaps this imperfect comparison will help. Mrs. Smith may divorce against pastoral counsel for unbiblical reasons that make her action a sin (I'm not implying that Chris's decisions are sinful). But after her divorce, I do not stubbornly insist on calling her Mrs. Smith because I am convinced her decision to divorce was sin. If she wishes to be known by her unmarried name, Ms. Jones, then that's how I will address her. No Christian virtue is advanced by my determination to punish her by calling her Mrs. Smith and labeling her as “divorced.” She is now Ms. Jones who is free to tell her own story. So, too, with Chris. I'm not simply playing along when I refer to him as male. I know Chris's story, and (in this instance) in the face of what I regard as credible uncertainty about his identity, I am making the choice to regard him as male.

While it may be uncomfortable and incongruous for us (if we happen to know our friend's physiological sex) to identify someone opposite to his/her given sex, I believe it can be a way of being incarnational, of saying “I am with you.” It need not be viewed as a collaboration with sinful rebellion (especially if, as in Chris's case, there is no evidence of rebellion) or a violation of any biblical ethics to make this accommodation. It is not necessarily an agreement that expressing oneself as the physiologically opposite sex is wise or right. Nor is it an abandonment of hope that the person with gender dysphoria may find some resolution or healing by God's grace. Such a response can be a hospitable accommodation that recognizes that the Spirit of

⁷⁹ Jn 4:7ff.

⁸⁰ Mk 5:1ff.

⁸¹ 2 Cor 4:16-18; Eph 4:20-24.

⁸² I appreciate Rosaria Butterfield's comments about how in love and humility she addresses neighbors who are same sex parents. She is attentive to how two female partners, for instance, want to be named and known, and the principle she employs offers insight about how to address friends with gender dysphoria who change their names and pronouns. Butterfield writes in *The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World*, 53: “I remember the right names so that I don't confuse the children raised in LGBT homes. I know who is Mama and who is Mommy and I teach my children to get it right too.”

God is present as we are present in the life of our friend who struggles – the Spirit is present and at work even if we see or experience little relief from the condition. It is an accommodation that keeps the gospel conversation going by continuing to ask each other, “What does it mean to live faithfully for Christ?” Of course, a public use of a preferred name or pronoun does not preclude the value or possibility of personal safe conversations about what it means to know, respect, and acknowledge each other.

5. A Change of Physiology

No doubt this is the most controversial option, but it makes sense that people pursuing gender coherence want that identity to be expressed to some degree physically. Research is just beginning to explore the degree to which hormone treatment or surgical changes provide long-term relief – Chris certainly expresses gratitude that the steps he has taken have significantly dampened the conflict in his life. For the relief he is experiencing, I give hearty thanks to the Lord.

But the underlying controversy over physiological intervention is whether such actions are moral or medical. By *moral*, are such actions mutilations of the body which would be unethical biblically, or are they rebellious manipulations of the body to live with self-creating autonomy which would also be unethical biblically?⁸³ Or, are these actions medical. By *medical*, are these interventions therapeutic in nature? If so, while the relationship between diagnosis and treatment is unclear, we have room to respond patiently and graciously with suffering people sometimes taking severe measures to find relief.

As when we consider a change of expression, we ask again similarly: May we and those who live with gender dysphoria view changes of physiology as therapeutic options which do not run counter to biblical ethics? Possibly, but I concur with those whose caution and concern about pursuing these options is considerable. Again, while biblical teaching on these matters is far from explicit, there are some relevant principles to keep in view and that give us direction and establish some boundaries.

a. The body is integral to a biblical view of self and stewardship

Without dismissing the reality and painfulness of gender dysphoria, creation and the Incarnation recognize that the body is essential to the completeness of personal identity. From creation the sex of our bodies is part of the givenness of our embodied identity. Since it is not possible to alter some aspects of our biological sex (e.g. chromosomal identification), I believe that efforts to change our physiological sex are probably unable to deliver what they promise. Some of these efforts seem to resolve co-occurring issues (e.g. depression) for some people, and some of these efforts dampen the intensity of the conflict for some people. However, there is no conclusive evidence that these efforts fully accomplish what they purport to

⁸³ Aside from matters of character (vanity, discontentment, etc.), there seems to be little controversy among Christians about the biblical ethics of body modification such as ear piercing, plastic surgery, etc.

change.⁸⁴ Therefore, I cannot recommend them as a method to resolve the conflict. I believe it is important to make choices as consistently as possible that affirm the essential goodness of what has been given to us (both our bodies and our sex) as men and women who bear God's image.

Additionally, I believe that the body provides significant and particular definition about who we are individually and relationally. Therefore, attempts to alter our physiological sex will run the risk of further confusing that definition of human identity. To grant that the bodily form can be reshaped to conform to an internal sense of self (including gender) is to rob the body of its voice in defining human identity. When that voice is silenced, then no embodied boundary remains to give shape and morality to human freedom. In other words when the body no longer declares "this is who I am" (with respect to its given sex), the ethical responsibilities derived from that declaration tend to become irrelevant.⁸⁵ The disjoining of a person's experience of sex from his/her physiological sex tends to move toward the Gnostic displacement of truth and reality from the whole person (mind and body) to only the mind. In this view the body has value only as an instrument to express an internal sense of truth and reality. In this framework, the actions of the body (potentially) can be dismissed as irrelevant to moral principles and biblical commands. But historic Christian thought affirms the value and meaning of mind and body as a unified, responsible whole.

Yet, the presence of genuine gender dysphoria points to a disruption of the creational unity. Is it possible for the body to be an unreliable indicator of a person's sex? While I will respond to this question in greater detail in the third section of this letter (see page 28), for now, I want to focus on the place of the body through the lens of creation.

b. The body is a gift that is a part of God's creational goodness.

"The first obligation of every human being is to hail [the] givenness [of who we are, including our embodied sex] as a created good, and to thank God for it, even though he or she may then have to acknowledge that for him or her in particular this created good has taken on the aspect of a problem."⁸⁶

The Psalmist prays for a united or undivided heart.⁸⁷ Why? Because all humans are born with varying degrees of discontinuity and incoherence between our personality (cognition, affection, volition) and body, between the external and internal dimensions of our being. The Gnostic alternative tends to separate the mind from the body and does not pray for unity and wholeness.

⁸⁴ For statistical data, please refer to Yarhouse and O'Donovan's works.

⁸⁵ Any kind of sexual or gendered ordering "that abstracts the personal form [a person's interior experience of gender] from the biological leaves the meaning of the biological form ambiguous, even questionable, whereupon the temptation soon overtakes us to regard it as an arbitrary and pointless limitation on personal freedom" (O'Donovan, 142).

⁸⁶ O'Donovan, 152.

⁸⁷ Ps 86:11 "unite my heart to fear your name."

In spite of our imperfections and incompleteness, we tend to move toward maturity and wholeness when we practice the gratitude in all things to which the Scriptures call us as disciples of Jesus: “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”⁸⁸ It is no small task to orient our lives toward gratitude. Nor is it a task to be undertaken alone, outside the community of grace.

Gratitude recognizes that the givenness of life in all its complexities calls us to be good stewards.⁸⁹ We treat all of life as gift – who we are and what we are inform our encounter with Christ, the greatest gift of all, and our need for the gospel. Again, this is no easy perspective to embrace, especially outside the community of grace.

Gratitude is not a denial of imperfection, but it is simultaneously an affirmation of the essential goodness of what we have received as well as a thankfulness for God’s grace at work in the midst of our brokenness. Gratitude sees Jesus, who joined us in a fallen world to suffer with us all the sorrows and struggles of life, assuring us that he is “a very present help in time of trouble.”⁹⁰

So, it seems clear that changes to a person’s physiological sex (surgical alteration and hormone therapy) tend to be inconsistent with biblical views of the body. Nor is there convincing evidence that physiological alterations reliably deliver the relief they promise. Nevertheless, I believe that our first response to a person pursuing these changes should *not* be condemnation for efforts to bring order to the dis-order imposed by gender dysphoria. Rather, I offer these considerations:

- While genuine gender dysphoria can be a real condition in which a person experiences profound discontinuity between the experience of sex and physiology, the alteration of the body cannot fully change a person’s given sex. If a person’s sex cannot fully be changed, then it follows that attempts to make changes to one’s physiology will not ultimately resolve the discontinuity that produces gender dysphoria.⁹¹
- While gender dysphoria is a painful experience of the brokenness of sex, I believe that attempts to alter physiology (about which there is no ambiguity relative to this condition) tend to complicate our call to exercise stewardship of and gratitude for healthy bodies that have been entrusted to us. It does not seem wise or biblically consistent to attempt to alter an apparently healthy physiology in an effort to move toward creational wholeness.

⁸⁸ 1 Th 5:18; cf. Ps 136:1-3; Eph 5:20; Col 3:17. The rebellion that leads to idolatry and the devaluing of the body has its roots in an unwillingness to give thanks (Rom 1:21:ff).

⁸⁹ 1 Pet 4:10 “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace”

⁹⁰ Ps 146:1.

⁹¹ I am aware that many in the trans community will disagree with this assertion, and many who seek relief from gender dysphoria find hope in the belief that a person’s sex can be fully altered. My disagreement may feel like I’m striking a blow against hope. But I believe that my assertion guards against *false* hope which can lead to even greater despair. A biblical view of creation affirms an inextricable link with humanness and sex. This means that we can no more change our ontological sex than we change our species since both belong to the fundamental core and the ontology of our being.

- While gender dysphoria has no known medical cure, there is no strong evidence that the alteration of physiology cures or fully removes the painful incongruity of the condition. We cannot ignore that there is clinical research evidence that some people who alter their physiology experience varying degrees of relief. Yet, it seems to me that changes to the body, rather than resolving the discontinuity, risk further complicating the discontinuity by treating the external and internal dimensions of our being as separable entities. There is always the risk that such alterations may actually accelerate the conflict between one’s physiology and one’s internal sense of sex.

Similar to the previous suggestion regarding a change of expression, one response that seems appropriate given these factors is to say: While we admit that we do not fully understand the condition; while we recognize that a change of physiology does not tend to follow the creational norm (a norm which brings with it ethical biblical responsibility that we do not dismiss because of brokenness or disability); and while we do not recommend changes to your physiology, we welcome you into our lives where we are together right now so that together we may learn what it means to entrust our lives to Christ and live by grace through faith, with hope, in love, all for his glory.

E. If God has made someone male or female, is it a sin to present one’s self as or to alter one’s body to appear to be the other sex?

1. First, the premise of this commonly-asked question needs to be carefully reconsidered. In the beginning God created sex – he created his image bearers to be male and female, a dimension of image-bearing which endures this side of the Fall. However, while a person’s sex exists within God’s providence (that is, his sovereign purpose), we are probably being reductionistic when we make the unqualified assertion that God is directly or mechanically responsible for causing every detail and event in the world.⁹² Jesus distinguishes between providence and responsibility when caring for the man born blind.⁹³ When asked, “Whose fault is it that this man was born blind?” Jesus refuses to answer the question of causality. Instead, he insists that we answer the question of providence: “For what purpose do all things, even broken things, exist?” For God’s glory. Therefore, while we do not blame God for causing us to be the way we are, we trust that he is always present and at work in our lives even in the areas of our most profound incompleteness, sin, and brokenness. He is always and everywhere at work bringing creation to completion.

⁹² James warns us about being “deceived” into believing that God is to blame for sin and its consequences (Jas 1:12-18). Yet the doctrine of providence affirms that nothing falls outside of God’s omnipotent rule – all things, both our sinful rebellion as well as the cosmic consequences of sin (sickness, disorder, brokenness), serve his eternal purpose (Rom 8:28; 2 Tim 1:9). Thus, the blindness of the man in Jn 9 exists both in a world created and ruled by God’s power and wisdom as well as to serve God’s purpose of bringing himself glory. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (V.ii) offers a well-articulated commentary on the relationship between God’s sovereignty and secondary causes: “In relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, he orders them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.”

⁹³ Jn 9:2-3 “His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.’”

2. Because God created his image bearers to be male and female, and because significant aspects of the way of life to which Christ calls us depend on maleness and femaleness, rebellion against our given sex or any part of God's creational intent is sin. Should any person under my pastoral care for any reason show a rebellious heart toward God, I will endeavor by God's grace to address that sin appropriately. However, it is not clear that the choices one makes in an attempt to restore some measure of order to the profound dis-order of gender dysphoria should indiscriminately or uniformly be labeled as rebellion. Based on the testimony of those who live with gender dysphoria, it's clear that no one chooses to live with gender dysphoria – those who live with the condition are desperately trying to resolve the dis-order and thereby live toward the creation. The pastoral and theological task of distinguishing what is struggle with the fallen brokenness of life in the world (disability) and what is rebellion against God's good creation (disobedience) is not a straightforward matter. I'll give further attention to this distinction in the discussion of Dt 22:5 and 1 Cor 11 that follows.

F. What do Deuteronomy 22:5 and 1 Corinthians 11:14 require of Christians today?

These two texts appear frequently in discussions about a biblical view of gendered presentation: how males present themselves as males, and females as females. It's important to understand what these texts mean and teach and how (or, if) they apply to the decisions facing the person living with gender dysphoria.

The Scriptures speak about sexual behavior based on the assumption that, because of the sexed nature of our image-bearing, we should be able to identify our own gender as well as the gender of others. That perspective establishes a significant correlation between "a woman shall not wear a man's garment..." (Dt 22:5) and "does not nature itself teach you..." (1 Cor 11:14). These two texts connect cultural expressions of clothing (Dt 22) and hair (1 Cor 11) with sexual identity. But, the more particular question we need to ask is: What is the relationship among these cultural expressions, essential sexual identity, and ethical responsibility?

In 1 Cor 11, what does Paul have in view when he talks about "nature"? Paul's use of "nature" cannot be a reference to ontological human nature, or a universal state of being, or else (for instance) the Nazarite vow,⁹⁴ in which as an act of God-pleasing worship a man vows not to cut his hair (e.g. Samson), would be inescapably sinful. "Nature" in this text must be something more localized or situated in the immediate cultural context. It must refer to cultural norms that give appropriate expression to both sexual identity and gendered relationships so that we honor marriage and do not sin against one another sexually.

1 Cor 11:24 functions similarly to Dt 22:5 in that both texts assume the biblical and creational expectation that we are to adopt cultural expressions that maintain male and female distinctions in our cultural settings and social relationships. The presentational character of sexual attraction has a lot to do with how we signal maleness and femaleness to one another.

⁹⁴ Nu 6:5.

Ontologically (universally),⁹⁵ marriage depends on our ability to distinguish maleness and femaleness and on the ability of one sex to recognize and desire the other. Both 1 Cor 11:14 and Dt 22:5 build on those assumptions.

The prohibition in Dt 22:5 refers to more than merely putting on clothes.⁹⁶ The text *does* have in view the gendered wearing of clothes and the fundamental obligation to express and honor our physiological sex – we should not overlook that implication. However, one of the most significant ways that we know that the text means more than simply the wearing of clothes is the declaration that this act of cross-dressing is “an abomination to the Lord.” The judgment of abomination is used in the Pentateuch almost exclusively for two sins: idolatry (which frequently had an illicit sexual component), and any sexual act which violates marriage. We reason (using the principle of *lex talionis*, or the rule of just measure) that the character of the judgment corresponds to the character of the action.

I conclude, therefore, that the prohibition related to cross-dressing most directly refers to the willful disordering of the biblical and physiological order. The Hebrew word used here for “garment” has military overtones. The text refers to the wearing of clothes (like a uniform) that are culturally associated with the other gender as a way to act out sexually as a person of the other gender. So, the prohibition against cross-dressing in Dt 22:5 has in view, not play-acting or espionage (neither of which is cross-dressing for prurient reasons), but a rejection of male/female distinctions *in order to behave as* the opposite sex for the purpose of sexual attraction and/or engaging in illicit sexual behavior. Thus in Dt 22:5, clothes are primarily a metonymy for sexually disordered behavior (i.e. homosexual sexual activity) that violates the sexual and covenantal integrity of marriage thereby warranting the abomination.

As noted previously, the scope of the Dt 22:5 does include the prohibition of cross-dressing for the purpose of *individual* sexual gratification (meaning a way of dressing for sexual arousal in contrast to cross-dressing as a means of engaging in illicit *relational* sexual behavior). Such cross-dressing violates the command to honor cultural expressions which maintain male/female distinctives, and it also violates the Ninth Commandment which forbids us from bearing false witness – don’t dress in order to deceive. That said, it’s important to note that cross-dressing as a fetish is very different from dressing to bring relief to gender incongruence and has little to

⁹⁵ Gen 1:27.

⁹⁶ Peter Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 287-288 - Dt 22:5 “does not refer simply to fashions or styles of dress as the warning contained in the final clause makes clear. It refers” either to transvestism “associated with certain forms of homosexuality” or with “practices associated with the cults of certain deities.” Allan Harman, *Deuteronomy*, 202 - “Such interchange of clothing was associated both with types of homosexuality and also with particular forms of heathen worship. That these... aspects are in view seems confirmed by the way in which the practice is described as an abomination.” Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 240-241 - Dt 22:5 “is not about styles or fashions in clothing, though it has been quoted in earnest” to that end. “Almost certainly it is about the perverted crossing of genders either in orgiastic rites involving transvestitism, or in some form of pagan worship, or both. The final phrase of the law shows that some form of serious immorality or idolatry was involved.” JPS Torah Commentary: *Deuteronomy*, 200 - Plausible readings of Dt 22:5 include “disguising one’s self as a member of the opposite sex [to] facilitate... fornication” and “a perverse means of sexual stimulation or homosexual role playing.” Raymond Brown, *The Message of Deuteronomy*, 213 - Dt 22:5 is “a warning... not to identify with degrading sexual and homosexual practices.” Gordon McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 337 - “The concern [of Dt 22:5] is either to discourage homosexuality or to prohibit transvestite practices found in [pagan] worship.”

do with the experience of gender dysphoria this present discussion has in view.⁹⁷ In most cases, when a person with gender dysphoria dresses *toward* or *as* the other physiological sex, he/she is attempting to resolve discontinuity by clarifying, and is not intent on confusing male/female distinctives or engaging in illicit sexual behavior.

While the context of 1 Cor 11 is the ordering of public congregational worship, the references to hair and head coverings assume our creational responsibility to find cultural forms that signal our maleness and femaleness to one another and that honor relationships built on the distinction of maleness and femaleness (most notably, marriage). Paul implies that the clear communication both of maleness and femaleness and the relationships based on those distinctive expressions significantly informs the ordered congregational life and worship of God's people.⁹⁸

The principle affirmed by these two texts is that we are to live unambiguously as male and female. Most people who live with gender dysphoria want to live without ambiguity, without conflict. Therefore, it is possible for us regard with understanding and compassion those attempts at change by which a person with gender dysphoria attempts to live wholly of one sex.

⁹⁷ Yarhouse, 85. It would be incorrect to assume that a person who cross-dresses for reasons of sexual gratification is therefore transgender.

⁹⁸ Anthony Thistelton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 830-831, 836-837. Paul "insists" that gender differences be maintained for the Church to exist and function with integrity. "Paul insists that a socio-symbolic expression of gender identity cannot be brushed aside.... [T]he gospel does not revoke expressions of the divine will established in the order of creation, or even sensitivities of perception within a surrounding culture.... Gender differentiation relates to that which God wills, decrees, and expresses in creation or in the creation order.... [Quoting Judith Gundry-Volf] 'Humanity exists in community centered around the creation of male and female.'"

III. WHAT IS THE BIBLICAL TEACHING ON SEX, GENDER, SIN AND THE FALL?

When transgender issues come up in conversation among Christians, one of the questions that dominates the conversation is: Is it possible for a person's sex to be different than the sex indicated by one's body (genitalia)?

With exceptionally great caution I answer the question in the affirmative because of what God teaches in the Scriptures about a) the extent of the Fall, and b) the composite nature of sex as created by God.⁹⁹ For these reasons I allow for the possibility that gender dysphoria can reveal a deep contradiction which overthrows creational coherence. In such cases, we may look to God for healing mercy as well as sustaining grace in every area of our beings in which we experience and identify brokenness and disorder related to sex.

Having said that, it's important to note that while, by God's grace, the genuine occurrence of this condition in the extreme seems to be extremely rare, and additionally while some people experience this condition in less than the extreme, there is no shortage of people claiming to have this condition to justify selfish, sinful, and sexually destructive behavior. Answering the question in the affirmative is not a justification of sexual rebellion, experimentation, self-gratification, or indifference. Nor is it to suggest that the condition of gender dysphoria is necessarily connected to unbiblical sexual behavior. Condition and behavior should be treated distinctly.

If the question can be answered in the affirmative, then there must be evidence that God teaches us in his word directly or by reasonable inference (as has always been the work of theological insight and application) that a) God created sex with a composite nature, and b) the Fall can damage one or more of those composite elements to the degree that a person's ontological sex can possibly be different than the sex indicated by one's anatomy. If the evidence fails to support either of these two claims, then the question must be answered in the negative.

For these reasons I recognize the possibility that gender dysphoria can be a result of the disordering of Creational coherence. But let's look at the biblical evidence that informs our thinking and practice.

A. What is the biblical starting point in our understanding of sex?

Some of the biblical and theological data mentioned earlier in this letter are foundational to this more detailed discussion, so I'll repeat a few of the points I've already made.

God created humans as sexed beings: male and female. He created us to be male or female distinctly. Sex is therefore essential to humanness.

⁹⁹ "Aspects of male and female sexuality... go beyond our different bodies and reproductive capacities. Sexuality is described broadly as 'everything in mind, body and behavior that arise[s] from being male and female.'" (Stanley Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* in Grant, 1771)

Since creation, only 3 people have possessed an unpolluted sex and an uncorrupted maleness or femaleness: Adam & Eve (briefly) and Jesus (now permanently).

Since the Fall, it is impossible for any person born from a biological father to possess an unpolluted sex. Similarly, it is impossible for any person to live and experience an unpolluted gendered expression of sex.

In spite of the Fall, these two sexes, distinctly yet together, sufficiently albeit imperfectly, bear God's image, form society, and establish marriage. Therefore, because of the corruption of sex, our gendered lives (the way we experience being male and female in the context of image bearing, social formation, and marriage) are also inescapably polluted and marred.¹⁰⁰ In each of these contexts (image-bearing, social formation, and marriage) the pollution is tied to the curse pronounced by God.¹⁰¹

We must also recognize the compound effects of sin. Every person who has ever lived is complicit in the Fallenness of the world – each person contributes in some way to our collective experience of sin.¹⁰² That includes our experience of sex. As a result the conditions we experience in life are not only the way things are, they also can be the way we or others have caused them to be. For instance, drought may be the result of the inscrutable rhythm of the seasons, or it may be the result of someone's hoarding selfishness and greed. Therefore, to take the presence and influence of sin seriously, we must consider the role of human influence (even our own) in the conditions we experience.¹⁰³

This means that since the Fall no experience of sex or of gendered relationships fully expresses the ideal of what sex and gender once were or one day will be. While we may genuinely experience sex and gender with a substantial amount of the goodness God intended, we are unable to point to any human experience of sex and gender as the fullness of what God has created them to be. Therefore, by grace and with hope, we live in brokenness and incompleteness toward the fullness of what God has created and will glorify.

¹⁰⁰ Along with other results of the Fall, disregard for creationally gendered relationships contributes to 1) the defacing of God's image and glory - "They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images" (Rom 1:23); 2) the corruption of society - "They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (Rom 1:29-31); and 3) the violation of marriage - "They gave up natural relations" (Rom 1:27).

¹⁰¹ Gen 3:16 "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

¹⁰² Is 53:6 "All we like sheep have gone astray." Rom 3:23 "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Mal 3:5 is one of many examples of how our sin relentlessly brings oppression upon others.

¹⁰³ Consider the tragic instance of children born with birth defects. In some cases we are able to make the connection between cause and effect (e.g. drug addiction, hereditary diseases). But in so many cases, we see no connection, and we have no explanation other than the world is not the way it's supposed to be. With respect to gender dysphoria, we must allow for the possibility that its cause can be known or unknown. It can be the result of personal choice or the actions or influence of others, or it can be the result of life in a Fallen world.

Because our sex (that is, our being male and female) has been corrupted, all the things which flow from our being male and female (our gendered lives) are also corrupted. God himself offers this graphic depiction of how the corruption of sex plays out – males are inclined to crush and females are inclined to subvert (Gen 3:16), a pattern characteristic of the human condition related to power and identity that impacts image-bearing, social formation, and marriage. Yet, God speaks directly to the grace and power of the gospel reversing the effects of the curse when Paul commands us to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ”¹⁰⁴; to “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves”¹⁰⁵; and “do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”¹⁰⁶ These actions of submission, honor, and service are all tied to sex and the gendered expression we give to our sex.

Note, too, that sex figures into the structure of the visible Church as an extension of marriage. Marriage is the template for the ordained life of the visible Church community: as Christ is the head of the Body of Christ (invisibly), so husbands (males) serve as the head of their wives in marriage¹⁰⁷ and consequently males serve as the head of the local visible incarnation of the Bride of Christ. But, sadly, here too in yet another of God’s ordained institutions, the corruption of sex brings disorder and pollution. Therefore, again, by grace and with hope, we live in brokenness and incompleteness toward the fullness of our relationship with God in Christ.

The pollution of sex is first one of condition, not performance. That is, image-bearing is not marred, society is not wrecked, and marriage (and the local church) is not violated solely because of our failure as humans to perform adequately to make our gendered expression of sex what it should be. We fail fundamentally because of the corrupt condition of sex we *bring into* the gendered ordering of our lives. Because sex is corrupt,¹⁰⁸ everything that flows from it is corrupt. Even those lives being made new in Christ have not yet fully escaped the corruption of sex through original sin.¹⁰⁹ To some degree we can control our actions (in this case, our gendered expressions), but we can do nothing about our fallen condition – it is beyond our grasp to change or control.¹¹⁰

B. The corruption of sex precedes the corruption of gendered expressions of sex.

¹⁰⁴ Eph 5:21.

¹⁰⁵ Phil 2:3.

¹⁰⁶ Gal 5:13.

¹⁰⁷ Eph 5:23 “the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church.”

¹⁰⁸ Gen 3:16.

¹⁰⁹ Rom 7:24; Gal 5:17; 1 Pet 2:11; Jas 3:2; 4:1; Ecc 7:20.

¹¹⁰ David speaks of the universal sinful condition when he says “in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps 51:5); Paul states that we are all “by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2:3); “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to everyone because the evidence of which is that all commit sinful acts – for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given” (Rom 5:12-13). The condition of sin is changed even as sinful acts are forgiven by God for Christ’s sake. The biblical view of sin includes (distinguishes but never separates) both our condition (sin) as well as our actions (sins).

The Fall did not annihilate sex. No, we affirm that God's providence restrains the extent to which sin infects and destroys the world. But it does mean that the existence and our experience of sex *as God created it* is lost until he makes the world (and us) new after the resurrection when we will be given bodies capable of experiencing the perfection of sex and the gendered expressions of our sex. By God's mercy, in this life we can still recognize maleness and femaleness, and we still bear God's image even as we can still order society, marriage, and the Church. Again, by grace and with hope, we live in brokenness and incompleteness toward the *shalom* of the world made new.

Sex is not a singular entity. It is complex. "We cannot avoid the reality that each of us is a socio-psycho-somatic whole."¹¹¹ There is a binary nature to sex in that God created humans male and female. But there are many elements which contribute to sex, to being male and female, and the diversity of those elements results in our experience of being male and female along a continuum. Most obviously is physiology, the visible dimension of our bodies that includes genitalia and the biology of sex. The mind is also a significant component of sex – the capacity to understand and synthesize ideas and concepts as well as to control the way the body processes data and organizes functions. Affection or desire plays another influential role as the capacity to recognize and be drawn toward the other sex. Body chemistry is at work in the existence of sex probably most significantly in the production of and interaction with hormones. Also, thanks to modern science, we know that genetics places a clear stamp on the existence and identification of sex. Finally, if sex is essential to our humanness, our whole person is sexed, body and spirit¹¹² – sex is more than the body.¹¹³ In ways we do not fully understand, there is a mysterious, spiritual dimension of sex in that sex is the presence and glory of God that precedes the gendered expression of our lives – from our sexed image-bearing,¹¹⁴ to the sexed nature of marriage,¹¹⁵ to God's role in joining men and women in marriage,¹¹⁶ to the union of Christ in our sex-related activity.¹¹⁷

C. How does the Bible speak to these various dimensions of sex?

¹¹¹ Grant, 1404.

¹¹² Rob Smith, "Responding to the Transgender Revolution" (www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/responding-to-the-transgender-revolution), October 12, 2017 quoting John Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate*, 78. "Biological processes are not just functions of the body as distinct from the soul or spirit, and mental and spiritual capacities are not seated exclusively in the soul or spirit. All capacities and functions belong to the human being as a whole, a fleshly-spiritual totality.' In other words, Scripture understands 'human beings holistically as single entities which are psychosomatic unities.' We are dealing, then, with a both-and: an ontological duality (a distinct body and soul) within a functional holism (an integrated person)." Smith affirms that sex is more than the body, but concludes that the spirit and body can never be at odds with each other. In my opinion, it's not at all clear how his appeal to Ps 139 supports his claim that functional holism is an incorruptible aspect of humanness and sex. Smith concludes that "there is, then, no person or soul or spirit that has been created independently of the body and then placed in the body (or perhaps in the wrong body)." But is anyone arguing for this view of independent creation? Not to my knowledge. In my opinion, while functional holism is nearly universally normative, sexual incongruence suggests a possible dysfunctional holism the root of which remains undetermined.

¹¹³ Gen 2:7; Mt 10:28; 2 Cor 5:1.

¹¹⁴ Gen 1:27.

¹¹⁵ Eph 5:23.

¹¹⁶ Mt 19:6.

¹¹⁷ 1 Cor 6:15.

The Bible does not speak uniformly to these several components of sex. As already noted, it speaks plainly and diversely about the spiritual dimension of sex. It is silent on genetics and chemistry. This is not to question the veracity and usefulness of genetics and chemistry, nor is it to suggest that technological knowledge is at odds with biblical revelation, but is just to note that the Bible doesn't rely on it. Additionally, the Bible acknowledges the presence of desire and affection.¹¹⁸ Also, while it does not address the science of the mind, it does recognize the use of the mind in learning, conviction, and decision-making,¹¹⁹ and it does acknowledge how defective mental processes can produce behavior that is unrecognizable as human.¹²⁰

The Body

The body is the most visibly prominent component of sex, and it is the most significant means by which we identify our sex and declare our sex to one another. By God's grace it is an overwhelmingly, in fact nearly universally reliable indicator of sex. God created sex to be embodied, and to be embodied in the physical complementarity of the two sexes. God created male and female genitalia for the purpose of sexual union and procreation.¹²¹ Therefore, image-bearing, society, marriage, and the church all depend on our ability to identify one another reliably and truthfully as male and female. Our responsibility as stewards of our sex is to present our sex and be known as our sex without ambiguity.¹²²

Creation and the Incarnation recognize that the body is essential to the completeness of personal identity. We believe that the body provides significant and particular detail about our sex and about who we are individually and relationally. But because of the Fall and the many ways we experience brokenness and chaos in our bodies, sometimes it can be difficult to know and present our bodies without ambiguity. When Jesus acknowledges that some people are born eunuchs,¹²³ he is quietly recognizing a very wide range of bodily disorder related to sex. There are people who are born without the physical features (and by reasonable implication, without chemical and mental features) that normally mark a person as belonging to one sex or another.

However, as I noted previously, to grant that the bodily form can be reshaped by an act of autonomous self-determination to conform to an internal sense of self (including gender) is to rob the body of its voice in definition of human identity. When that voice is silenced, then no embodied boundary remains to give shape and morality to human freedom. In other words when the body's declaration of "this is who I am" (with respect to its given sex) is discarded

¹¹⁸ Sol 7:10; 1 Cor 7:37; Col 3:5; Jud 1:7

¹¹⁹ Phil 4:8; 2 Tim 2:7; Tit 3:14

¹²⁰ Dan 4:31-34. When the Gadarene man is liberated by Jesus from demonic influence, he is restored to his "right mind" (Mk 5:15). When his mind was not working properly, he behaved (according to the Gospel-writer's description) like an animal or a sub-human. Without discounting the role of the demonic in creating this man's dehumanized condition, I observe that a disordered mental state or condition can produce profoundly unhuman and disordered behavior.

¹²¹ Gen 1:28; Gen 2:24

¹²² 1 Cor 11:14-15 – relationships in the church, family, and society depend on the ability of our sex to be known (along with relationships and responsibilities dependent on our sex) without ambiguity.

¹²³ Mt 19:12.

because of personal preference, the ethical responsibilities derived from that declaration become irrelevant.¹²⁴ The disjoining of a person's experience of sex from his/her given bodily sex tends to move toward the Gnostic displacement of truth and reality from the whole person (mind and body) to only the mind or some other interior component. In such a willful disconnection the body has value only as an instrument to express an internal sense of truth and reality. In this framework, the actions of the body (potentially) can be dismissed as irrelevant to moral principles and biblical commands. But historic Christian thought affirms the value and meaning of mind and body as a unified, responsible whole.¹²⁵

Spirit

We read that in the beginning God created the human form and then blew into it an animating spirit.¹²⁶ As a result we understand that humans are embodied beings. The body is not a mere husk that serves the spirit – the body is a purposeful part of the whole person. Rather, the whole person is body *and* spirit. Therefore, body *and* spirit are essential to being human and to being male or female, and we cannot reduce humanness or sex only to the body.

This understanding has two important implications for this conversation about the complex nature of sex. First, the body separately from the spirit cannot speak absolutely in defining a person's sex. The body speaks reliably, but not infallibly or comprehensively. But our sex is located in our whole person, body and spirit, and our sex cannot be reduced to one or the other. Second, alterations to the body alone cannot ultimately change a person's sex if the spirit is essential to a person's sex. The biblical witness is that the sexed spirit endures even absent from the body as it awaits re-embodiment in the resurrection.¹²⁷ Then, in the resurrection, we will resume our lives in the world made new as sexed humans, although our gendered relationships will be expressed differently in the life to come.¹²⁸

Genetics

While the body provides a normative and reliable indication of sex, genetics almost always provides the clearest confirmation of a person's given sex. To the extent that chromosomal sex cannot be altered, genetics further confirms that we cannot fully change our sex even if our experience of sex is damaged, incomplete, and disordered.

Shalom

¹²⁴ Any kind of sexual or gendered ordering "that abstracts the personal form [a person's interior experience of gender] from the biological leaves the meaning of the biological form ambiguous, even questionable, whereupon the temptation soon overtakes us to regard it as an arbitrary and pointless limitation on personal freedom" (O'Donovan, 142).

¹²⁵ See Andy Crouch, "Sex Without Bodies" http://andy-crouch.com/articles/sex_without_bodies.

¹²⁶ Gen 2:7.

¹²⁷ 1 Sam 28:11-12; Mt 17:3; Mk 9:4; Lk 9:30; 1 Pet 3:19.

¹²⁸ Mt 22:30.

As I've noted previously, the Bible regards humans (that would include sex) as complex persons. Since the Fall the current reality of human experience is division and disorder. It's true that, by God's grace, sin has been restrained so that we experience a tremendous degree of regularity and coherence both within our personalities and in the ordering of the world and our lives. Nevertheless, we pray with David, "Give me an undivided heart." Or, to pray with the hope of *shalom*, "Unite my heart."¹²⁹ James mourns the contradictory nature of our divided lives.¹³⁰ Paul laments the war that rages among the several parts of our personality.¹³¹ John longs for the disjointed and damaged experience of life to be brought healing and rest in the world made new.¹³² Even the conscience is divided in the one Body of Christ called to live in unity – the conscience of one does not agree with the conscience of another even though both are striving to be dependent on the same Spirit.¹³³

As fallen creatures, we are to live toward the way God created us in the beginning and toward the completeness that will be ours in the fullness of redemption. In this life as males and females, we are to live unambiguously as male and female because as Paul notes in 1 Cor 11, there are times when we must be self-conscious about resisting the pull toward ambiguity. As males and females we are to direct our desires toward the other complimentary sex, because as Paul notes in Rom 1, some of us have to be disciplined in saying "no" to self-centered and misplaced desires. As husbands and wives we are to live toward being "naked and unashamed" in each other's presence, because (as God warned in the curse) we are often willing to shame and wound those with whom we are most intimate. The fact that most people experience sexual coherence, desire the other sex, and value trust and intimacy is a testimony of God's mercy.

In every area of life, including sex, we are living with disorder and incompleteness and the simultaneous hope of *shalom* because of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus promises to make all things new,¹³⁴ he does not mean different (like turning oranges into orangutans). He does not mean restored (resetting the clock and returning us to Eden). He means *complete* – all that is known only in part and piecemeal¹³⁵ will be made whole, and all that we are longing for in redemption¹³⁶ will be brought to the end for which God created it in the beginning. Only in the world made new will we experience the completeness of redemption.¹³⁷ So, too, with sex. Today we live with it, know it, and experience it as a good rooted in creation¹³⁸ as well as in the life and glory of God; yet at the same time we live knowing it is not all it was or all it will be.

¹²⁹ Ps 86:11.

¹³⁰ Jas 3:6-12.

¹³¹ Rom 7:13-20.

¹³² Rev 21:1-4.

¹³³ Rom 14:20.

¹³⁴ Rev 21:5.

¹³⁵ 1 Cor 13:8-13.

¹³⁶ Rom 8:22-23.

¹³⁷ 1 Th 5:23.

¹³⁸ 1 Tim 4:4.

Gender is our lived experience of sex. Sex cannot be held in abstraction. It is an embodied reality, and the body is made for living and culture-making in all the social and ethical dimensions that implies. So, in addition to the responsibility to live unambiguously as our given sex, we are to relate to one another as sexed beings in the way God has intended. This means that, ethically, sexual union is reserved for marriage between a male and a female.

D. Is there a single determinative component of sex?

Among the several elements that comprise sex, can any one element be used to confirm a person's sex?

Genetics

Genetic identification is data available to those with access to technology. The Scriptures do not rely on scientific information for us to identify our sex, so we should expect that other components can provide sufficiently reliable markers for us to live gendered lives in a way that pleases God and moves us toward *shalom*. So when other markers are disordered, ambiguous, or even absent, genetic information can be helpful in making sex identifications.

Genetic information provides important specificity in making sex identifications – XX chromosomes designate that a person is of female sex and XY chromosomes designate that a person is of male sex. Assuming that the genetic coding operates properly in directing the form and function of the body, chromosomal data is highly reliable information with respect to sex identification. Except in very rare cases, we can regard the chromosomal data as definitive when that data are available. But we qualify the assumption because we know that genes are touched by the Fall along with every other component of sex – we know from history that genes do not always function properly. Or, as we often say, the wiring gets crossed.

As a theological presupposition, we affirm that the disordering corruption of sin descends even to this normally unseen dimension of our being and life. As a matter of theological principle we are happy when our genetic structure seems to operate properly. Yet we know that even when things appear to be working smoothly, our genes and chromosomes are not what they once were or one day will be. We should not be surprised (at either the genetic or the social level) when something that appears normal proves to be disordered.¹³⁹ Genetics has the capacity to create tremendous conflict and confusion with the being of a person who may externally or physically appear unconflicted. Therefore, we admit the possibility that genetics can be at odds with one's physiology.

¹³⁹ It's important to note that people whose bodies appear to be in sync with the creational intent cannot say they are exempt from brokenness with respect to sex. Because sex has a complexity of components, the appearance of order almost always masks some sort of sin-related disorder, possibly even spiritual disorder. This reality should humble people who do not live with gender dysphoria or same sex attraction. In fact, we should not be surprised when Christians who live with gender dysphoria or same sex attraction live by a more grounded dependence on the gospel and a more faithful attentiveness to biblical sexual ethics than their heterosexual and non-dysphoric brothers and sisters.

Chemistry

What is true of genetics is also true of body chemistry. Sex depends on chemistry's working accurately and in harmony with other chemicals and bodily functions. But to my knowledge there is no formula for calculating how much testosterone or estrogen is needed for a person to be male or female. Yet chemistry is a powerful formative component of sex. Some researchers suggest that hormones and chemistry maybe more influential in defining a person's sex than genes. We know that people live within a chemical range that produces a wide variety of gendered expressions: males with strongly feminine qualities and females with strongly masculine qualities (qualities which are often to a significant degree defined by cultural habits and expectations). Here again, body chemistry is polluted by the Fall, and we should not be surprised when sex-related chemistry produces confused and disordered sex. Chemistry, too, has the capacity of being at odds with one's physiology.

The Brain

Similarly, the brain.¹⁴⁰ Science is gaining ground in understanding the operation of the brain, but many mental functions remain a profound mystery. There are many ways we know first-hand that the brain does not always function reliably – we experience forgetfulness, despair, delusions, confusion. When a person suffers a stroke, motor skills can be severely impaired because the brain is no longer communicating effectively with the limbs.

Scientists have observed learning patterns – not all brains connect and assimilate the data they store in the same way (linear, circular, abstract, concrete thinking). And the brain can trigger belief and action without our conscious will to do so. There is evidence of the Fall all through the operation of the brain, and it's possible for the brain to misdirect hormones, affection, or any other component of our sex.

Yet, we live in a world in which God preserves order and stability. That includes the capacity to know, reason, choose, and create. In fact, the core of the Christian life in the exercise of faith and obedience assumes the reliability of mental functions. As a result it's normal for us to look in the mirror, know ourselves, and identify our sex when the brain is functioning properly. But our brains are fragile, and we know how easily they can be damaged and scarred even as scientists are learning more about the powerful influences on the brain children can experience in pre-natal and infant development including influences that impact sex. The brain, as well as chromosomes and chemistry, has the capacity of functioning counter to one's physiology.

Affection

¹⁴⁰ For further discussion of the role of the brain in sex, see Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, "What Causes Gender Dysphoria."

Affections can be disordered as well as misplaced. It's generally unclear to us what gives rise to affections in every instance. We know that they can be cultivated, and we know that in most situations they can be controlled. Therefore, we are not surprised that the Scriptures call us to develop godly affections¹⁴¹ including affections related to sex. We observe the biological strength that affections can have when they become pathological and irrationally drive actions beyond the point of self-control. As our prison system testifies, people with pathological behavior have to be restrained, a tragic commentary on the degree to which Fallen affections can destroy. We also note that affections are not always submissive to the mind or the will – they can persist even when unwanted and uncultivated (as is the case for some Christians who experience persistent same-sex attraction). While we are unlikely to say that disordered affection alone can be the basis for defining a person's sex (while the capacity to desire belongs to sex, the act of affection belongs to gender), we can recognize what severe confusion and heartache result from disordered affection.

Spirituality

Sex has a deeply spiritual dimension. As the Scriptures attest, the unseen forces of evil can insinuate their influence in this spiritual aspect of sex. Disordered and confused sex can be the result of the principalities of darkness overthrowing the *shalom* of God. We rarely have the means to discern the exact nature of this influence, but we are commanded to arm ourselves for the attacks that are sure to come.¹⁴²

Anatomy

Then there is the role of the body, most particularly genitalia. It is that component of sex that we can most easily see and quantify. We are able to observe both the nearly universal reliability of how the body reveals sex as well as the bodily disfigurements and disorders that can make a person's sex physiologically unrecognizable.

No aspect of our being figures more prominently than the body in our ability to identify sex. Our bodies are essential in presenting ourselves to one another in gendered relationships. The reliability of our bodies to reveal sex becomes the standard for the ethical sexual behavior to which we are called in Scripture. As we know each other as male and female, and have confidence that those assignments are accurate (hence the responsibility to present ourselves unambiguously with respect to gender), we then are able to marry and engage in sexual union and procreation. The Scriptures assume the reliability of the body to communicate a person's sex and similarly condemn efforts to obscure that clear communication.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, when the other elements that comprise sex are deeply disordered (particularly genetics, chemistry,

¹⁴¹ 2 Pet 1:5-7.

¹⁴² Eph 6:10-20.

¹⁴³ See the previous more detailed discussion of these texts. In summary, Dt 22:5 forbids both homosexual sexual behavior as well as concurrent false presentation of sex to that end. Also, 1 Cor 11:14-15 forbids any presentation of sex that overthrows or confuses the gendered nature of marriage and the gendered community of the Church.

and the brain), the clarity with which the body normally speaks can be compromised and, in rare cases, contradictory.

E. Given the reliability and role of the body with respect to sex, is it possible for a person's sex to be different than the sex indicated by one's anatomy?

Or, to ask the question another way, is it possible that a person's experience of gender dysphoria is because that person's sex is different than the sex indicated by his/her body?

Given the biblical data on both the complex, component nature of sex and the radical extent of the Fall, with great caution I answer in the affirmative. We are able to observe that there are persons whose bodies (genitalia) do not match their genetic identification. Just as Jesus acknowledges people who are born eunuchs, so we observe people who are born intersex. Therefore, we recognize in rare cases that having XY chromosomes does not guarantee having corresponding XY genitalia – in such cases anatomy is of little value in identifying sex. While brain function and chemistry are not as easily observable and identifiable as genetics and the body, it's reasonable to assume that there are instances in which XY chromosomes do not produce XY brain function and XY chemistry (as well as XY affection).¹⁴⁴ Even when we do not have access to the technological data regarding those components of sex which we cannot see unaided (genetics, the brain, chemistry), we should be able to discern the general nature of any discontinuity between a person's body and the other unseen components of sex. In other words, even without technological data, we should be able to discern if the sex-related conflict a person experiences is due either to a willful rejection and disordering of God's creation, or to an underlying brokenness (among the members of the body) that is the source of the conflict.

That said, I want to underscore heavily some important qualifications:

1. Given the reliability of the body to reveal a person's sex, exceptions are rare. We should rely on physiology as an indicator of sex unless we have significant reasons to believe otherwise.
2. Given that God created sex as the basis for relationship with himself and others, exceptions are to be recognized in community, not autonomously. Exceptions require corroborating support from those in a position to speak knowledgably about a person's mind, body, spirit, affections, and chemistry. It is no small thing to conclude that a person's anatomy is communicating inaccurate information about that person's sex, and self-diagnosis (while important) is insufficient in itself to justify an exception.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ I'm aware that there has been no scientific definition of an "XY brain." I simply mean that the brain needs to play its part in concert with all the other parts that work together to comprise a coherent sex.

¹⁴⁵ Andrew Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate*, 43. "The self is not such a good place to look to for authority, knowledge, and trustworthiness." Walker is correct with respect to authority, but he overstates the case regarding knowledge and trustworthiness. We value knowledge in community and the wisdom of many counselors (Prov 15:22). However, reliable self-knowledge is essential to navigating the many choices and circumstances in the life of faith. Humans' competence in acquiring knowledge is the basis for our moral accountability to worship God (Rom 1:18-22). The scriptures assume that individual humans possess the ability and responsibility to deduce trustworthy knowledge as a basis for making wise choices (1 Cor 11:14; Prov 6:6). As Calvin pens the opening lines of the *Institutes* (I.1.i), he affirms with equal emphasis the necessity of knowledge of

3. Given that sex is a complex and deeply mysterious gift from God, we must be humble about over-simplifying that complexity and speaking with improper confidence about matters we know only in part. God assures us that he will give us sufficient knowledge to live faithfully, but he offers no reason to believe that we can know anything comprehensively. This assurance is true when we are making difficult decisions about understanding and charting a way through deep confusion and uncertainty related to sex.

4. Given God's covenant, we should not be surprised by the regularity of life that results from his covenant faithfulness. But we must not mistake this stability for the eradication of brokenness and the impact of sin in this life. We experience change and healing by his redemptive and sustaining grace, and we give thanks for the predictability of life due to his providence. By his grace it is common for us to rest in self-knowledge and to delight in the knowledge of others.

5. Given the nature of evil and the devastation of sin, we should not be surprised by the degree to which we can witness the distortion of God's good creation. Evil is present in the world and in us before we act and make our own contribution to this present evil age. There is no part of the universe untouched by the Fall, evil, and sin. So, we know that we will witness creational upheaval in the most profound and disorienting ways in every area of life, including sex.

6. Given the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of God, we may live together with our brokenness and sadness in hope knowing that he is making all things new. One day, he will wipe away all tears, and we will stand in his presence known by name, male and female, whole, complete, without conflict, and full of glory.

To summarize, I want to say two things with nearly equal weight: a) it is my very cautious opinion that it is possible for a person's ontological or essential sex to be opposite that of one's physiological sex; and b) the standard for making that distinction is high and cannot be based simply on a person's self-diagnosis. Because of the role of the body, both to identity and ethics, I believe we should be confident that the body accurately identifies a person's ontological sex unless there are substantial reasons to believe otherwise. But this distinction is not in any way a denial that gender dysphoria can be a very real and excruciating conflict among the several sexual components which contribute to what should be (but is not) a coherent and unified sexual identity. Conflict and condition overlap significantly, but they are not entirely the same thing. To the extent that *conflict* can be a temporary part of sexual development or the result of sinful behavior, I would expect this wider experience of dysphoria to be more common than the persistent *condition* of gender dysphoria

God and knowledge of self, pondering that "which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern." There is knowledge I cannot know apart from divine self-disclosure in revelation, and there is knowledge others cannot know about me apart from personal self-disclosure in relationship. Therefore, we must listen to one another's stories and begin by receiving them as true.

My goal is not to persuade you that every person with gender dysphoria experiences the conflict to the greatest degree possible and lives with a persistent condition. I certainly do not believe that the only remedy or relief for gender dysphoria is bodily transformation. My goal is to consider the degree to which some people experience gender dysphoria and the range of options they consider to find relief so that we as the Church and the community of grace can have a more informed starting point in offering pastoral care.

IV. WHAT PASTORAL GUIDANCE CAN WE AS A CHURCH FAMILY OFFER?

What, then, can be said pastorally to the person living with gender dysphoria and to the congregational community to which that person belongs? Above all else, remember and affirm that we are on the journey together as members of Christ's Body. Therefore, we are learning together to live in that dynamic triad of faith, hope, and love. *Faith*: obedience to God's word and trust in God's presence, power, and purpose. *Love*: sacrificial commitment to one another's honor and glory. *Hope*: confident expectation because Jesus' bodily resurrection ratifies the Father's promise to make all things new, that all will be well.

Each week as we celebrate the Eucharist in congregational worship, I watch Chris take the bread and the cup to his lips as together we pray, reaffirming God's covenant faithfulness, confessing our sin, declaring the reality of our new life in Christ, renewing our vow to live faithfully, and tasting a hint of the world made new. This Body of which we partake with the Body as a means of grace nourishes our confidence that one day this mortal will put on immortality. Our struggle with sin will be behind us, and all that is disordered in this life will be made whole and complete in the shalom of God's kingdom.

Also, this bread and cup is the Body that died for our sin. In coming to the Sacrament, we taste the reality of God's forgiveness for Jesus' sake. Why? Because, though redeemed, everything we do is fraught with sin. Especially in areas in which we live with great intensity (either exhilaration or pain), it's easy for us to overlook or excuse sin. Walking with one another means that we are committed to encouraging each other to live faithfully – to obey what God has made clear in his word, to live wisely for his glory in choices that require great discernment, to act as members of the Body that need each other in the economy of God's grace.

Until that day of rest and completion, what can we say and do as we struggle together to live faithfully in our fallen but redeemed bodies?

A. In what ways might gender dysphoria be an occasion for sin?

1. For the person loving someone with gender dysphoria

Even at its best, life in community is messy. In community we discover how much we have in common, and how easily we are all prone to similar sins. We all are to be aware that our enemy will not miss an opportunity to insinuate himself into our lives to wreak hurt and havoc and to obscure and disfigure even more the image we all bear. Our genuine desires to love and serve can easily become polluted when love requires patience and when we discover how weak we really are to affect change.

- *Pride*. Being blind to your own sin.
- *Anger*. Raging against people with whom you disagree.
- *Lust*. Blaming others of sexual sin as a cover for your own sexual sin.
- *Impatience*. Criticizing others because you do not see them changing fast enough.

- *Ingratitude.* Failing to give thanks for God’s grace through those who struggle.
- *Self-centeredness.* Being inconvenienced by other’s weakness or sin.
- *Rebellion.* Being deaf to God’s call to live humbly and sacrificially.
- *Indifference.* Being unwilling to weep with those who weep.
- *Loathing.* Nursing contempt for those of whom you disapprove.

2. For the person living with gender dysphoria

Living with the condition of gender dysphoria, like most other expressions of creational disorder, is not sin in itself. This list is not an indictment, but is a recognition that the subtle erosion that accompanies any long struggle can easily make any of us more vulnerable to sin. So, this is a loving caution to be wary of the inroads our enemy can make at our points of weakness.

- *Anger.* Raging at God, at people, at self.
- *Self-centeredness.* Making the world revolve around self and selfish demands.
- *Pride.* Being unwilling to learn, forgive, or trust.
- *Lust.* Grasping for approval or sexual gratification.
- *Rebellion.* Demanding control or being defiant of God’s commands.
- *Ingratitude.* Being unwilling to be thankful to God and others.
- *Impatience.* Holding onto anger at God and others who seem slow to act.
- *Indifference.* Being unwilling to care for or respect others.
- *Loathing.* Nursing a disgust for or a willingness to harm self or others.

God has given us to each other so that through our relationships with one another he might make us more like Jesus. The Spirit has entrusted gifts to each of us making us co-laborers with him in carrying out God’s work of redemption. For that reason we value each person in our lives as an agent of grace and as someone to honor and serve. When we walk with one another through the joys and struggles of life, we tread on holy ground. God is here – Father, Son, and Spirit. Our sin is exposed that his grace might heal us. Our weaknesses are revealed so that his strength might sustain us. Are we committed to each other’s glory and joy? Are we committed to lives shaped by faith, hope, and love?

B. What positive direction can we recommend?

1. For the person living with gender dysphoria.

Whether you are considering committing your life to Christ or whether you are trying to live out your commitment to Christ, we as a Christian community want you to know that our love for you begins where we are together right now. We want to be a community in which together we can increasingly experience the richness and fullness of relationships for which God has created us and Christ has redeemed us. We are committed never to shame or shun you, and we are committed to honor you as a person made in God’s image and in Christ as a person

made righteous by his grace. We want to walk alongside you recognizing that each of us lives with profound brokenness because of sin and the Fall, often in ways we never fully understand. That means we know there are a lot of things we need to learn together. We are committed to offering you every possible encouragement, and we are committed to helping you know and trust God more fully as well as understand and apply the teaching and promises of God in his word. We want to live together with the confidence that God's grace is sufficient to sustain us through all the incompleteness, suffering, and sorrow that is a part of life as we know it. We want to encourage each other with God's promise to wipe away our tears and make all things new.

Pray.

“Cast all your cares upon the Lord because he cares for you” (1 Pet 5:7). Continue to entreat the Lord both for transforming as well as sustaining grace. Name your fears; rehearse what is true (including God's character and your identity in Christ); affirm your faith, hope, and love; confess your sin and believe in God's forgiving mercy; ask questions; make your requests known to God; give thanks.

Stay connected to mature Christian community.

You are not alone. Continue to value peer friendships as well as connection with those who most deeply understand what you experience. But also lean on those whose spiritual maturity and life experience help you live with a large view of God's providence. It is God's design for all of us to benefit from the resources he has entrusted to the members of his Body. Know and believe that you are God's grace gift to the community.

Keep learning.

Keep asking questions about gender, healing, community, identity. Learn all you can from medical professionals and those discovering more about gender dysphoria. You are making decisions about your body and your health, so as an act of responsible stewardship, fully engage the skill and wisdom of the medical community. Learn all you can from wise skilled counselors who offer informed insight about the mind, the heart, relationships, and our interior lives. You are making decisions about how to apply understanding to life and how to gain an understanding of self that leads toward wholeness. All those who love you urge you not to succumb to the temptation to believe that you are your best physician and that you know yourself better than anyone else – neither is true.

Remain in close conversation with those who pastor you.

Keep asking questions about God, faith, the Scriptures. Endeavor, with the help of your shepherds, to make your gender-related choices before the face of God. Even though you will be living as part of Christian community that is committed to charity, you know that not everyone will understand, support, or agree with you in the same way. But if your pastors are

in close conversation with you, they can be present with you in your journey. They can share in your joys and sorrows. Together you can look to God's word for instruction, truth, correction, and encouragement. They can stand for you and witness to your heart for God as the community learns how to walk together in truth and love.

Be courageous.

Life is hard, and following Christ is not easy (Jesus describes it as taking up a cross¹⁴⁶). Endurance requires courage because we live through many things in life that we cannot resolve or repair. To live with courage means that we are to live valuing something or someone more than ourselves.¹⁴⁷ For Christians courage displaces self-centeredness with a loyalty that flows from a deep love for and trust in Jesus. Living with courage is daring to say back to our God the words of Jesus, "Not my will – may your will be done."¹⁴⁸ Our deepest joy comes when we live out the conviction that God has made us for holiness, not happiness.

Be cautious.

Give yourself enough time and space to make informed decisions as you pursue options that promise resolution or relief. Allow for the possibility that things can change over time for the better: healing, maturity, knowledge, skill, courage, hope, and other virtues. However, if you become convinced that you need to alter your expression or physiology, take the least invasive steps possible and do as little alteration as possible. Remember to come to these conclusions in close conversation with godly counsel and as an act of faith before the face of God.

Be patient.

People (like me) who do not live with gender dysphoria have a difficult time understanding the pain and chaos created by the condition. Be as respectful with others who make an effort to understand you as you want them to be of you – not everyone will agree with your understanding or choices. Some people will be confused or alarmed; none more so than parents who are guiding their children through questions of sex, gender, boundaries, and identity. As you well know, very practical matters like use of bathrooms and participating in gender-based groups call for communication and humility. Be as accommodating with others as you want them to be of you. Focus on learning to love others where they are in the situations of their lives.

Act in faith.

Every decision we make expresses what we believe. For us as Christians, every choice is inextricably tied to our faith, so much so that "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Mt 16:24.

¹⁴⁷ Rom 12:10; Phil 2:3.

¹⁴⁸ Mt 26:39; Mk 14:36; Lk 22:42; Jn 6:38.

¹⁴⁹ Rom 14:23.

Everything we do confirms or denies our loyalty to Christ. The gospel is to be the ground upon which we “live and move and have our being.”¹⁵⁰ Consider carefully how your choices confirm Bonhoeffer’s “I am thine.”

2. For the person loving someone with gender dysphoria

We love one another in community. That is, our love for and faithfulness to one another are not isolated acts, but are expressions of our shared commitment to one another. Therefore, we begin with the commitment to love each other for the people we are – created for relationship and community, made in God’s image, and in Christ clothed in his righteousness. We are committed never to shame or shun one another. We want to walk alongside one another, repenting of our own sin and confessing our own profound brokenness because of sin and the Fall, often in ways we never fully understand. We want to be agents of grace as we help each other more and more to know and trust God as well as to understand and apply the teaching and promises of God in his word. We want to live together with the confidence that God’s grace is sufficient to sustain us through all the incompleteness, suffering, and sorrow that is a part of life as we know it. We want to encourage each other with God’s promise to wipe away our tears and make all things new.

Pray for our friends who live with gender dysphoria.

Intercede for their safety, peace, courage, integrity, healing, hope. Stand with them before the throne of grace, and stand with them publicly. Jesus is not ashamed of us and of being known as one of us. So, too, we must not be ashamed of one another.

Pray for your own heart and mind.

Repent of your anger, pride, impatience. Ask the Spirit of Christ for understanding and wisdom. Ask the Spirit to make clear to you how your friend who lives with gender dysphoria is God’s gift to you and the community.

Learn all you can about gender dysphoria and issues that surround it.

Be careful to distinguish it from the many cultural issues that are frequently (often unfairly, unkindly, and inaccurately) attached to it.

Consider the three-framework approach (faith, love, hope).

Wrestle with keeping the three lenses together: honor God’s word and creation, acknowledge disability and fallenness, and allow the path forward together to be imprecise and even messy.

Live with integrity.

¹⁵⁰ Acts 17:28.

Do not violate your conscience, but remember that there is always more to learn. Living with conviction does not require you to be judgmental or unkind.

Live with compassion.

Do not harden your heart to the struggles of others, but practice selfless love and generosity.

Live with hope.

Believe that God's grace will sustain and preserve us until his work in creation is complete.

Resist the urge to fix people.

Be convinced that only God's Spirit can change our hearts and give us new life in Christ.

Show hospitality to those who live with gender identity issues.

Build trust through honest friendships, and learn to see the world through someone else's eyes. Demonstrate a selfless hospitality that delights in seeing other people flourish.

Be courteous.

Prayerfully consider recognizing our friends with gender dysphoria as they wish to be known. Practice a mutual respect that extends the same degree of generosity and courtesy you would like extended to you. As was previously noted, very practical matters like use of bathrooms and participating in gender-based groups, call for communication, patience, and humility. If you have difficulty knowing what to say or do, seek the counsel of the elders.

Seek counsel.

If loving a friend who lives with gender dysphoria puts you in a situation in which you are confused or alarmed, do not react in the moment, but seek out one of the elders or an informed confidant to pray with you and offer you some guidance.

Act in faith.

How does your commitment to Christ constrain how you love someone with gender dysphoria? How do your responses and attitudes proceed from the gospel?

There is of course much more that can be said on all these matters, but let me give the last word to the Apostle Paul:

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many. For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. (2 Cor 1:8-12)

For further reading:

Mark Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, InterVarsity Press, 2015.

Oliver O'Donovan, "Transsexualism and Christian Marriage" *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 1983.

The Christian Medical Fellowship statement on gender dysphoria:

www.cmf.org.uk/resources/publications/content/?context=article&id=26419

RECOMMENDATIONS:

“I genuinely appreciate the thoughtful, pastoral reflection on gender dysphoria offered by Steve Froehlich. His attempt to bridge the gap that so often exists between theology and pastoral care is greatly needed and will be a benefit to many Christians.”

Mark A. Yarhouse, Psy.D., Professor of Psychology and the Rosemarie S. Hughes Endowed Chair, Regent University, author of *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture*.

“Steve Froehlich’s research and careful biblical reflection on how we should think about gender dysphoria is the most helpful and practical work that I have read on this topic. This will be of enormous help to pastors and others who seek to offer sensitive and biblical care to those who are struggling with this issue and to their families and friends.”

Richard Winter, M.D., Professor Emeritus of Applied Theology and Counseling, Covenant Theological Seminary.

“As a Christian couple that has been dealing with a transgendered child over the last few years, we have been encouraged by Rev. Froehlich’s pastoral care for families who are going through this, even outside of his own congregation. We have struggled with how to make sense of this issue from a biblical point of view while still extending love and grace to our child, and his paper has been helpful to us in the process. We appreciate his genuine compassion and desire to understand the issue from a personal point of view while still holding firm in his biblical and theological convictions.”

Parents (name withheld)

Pastor Froehlich’s letter “is a worthy effort in terms of research and quality of thought. And it breathes a wonderful spirit of Christian compassion.”

John Frame, J. D. Trimble Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary.

“Gender dysphoria is an issue which was not even in our vocabulary, until we suddenly found ourselves faced with the need to become educated about it quickly. As Christian parents, we were desperate to understand what God’s word as well as pastors, teachers, researchers, and counselors said about the subject.

Steve Froehlich helped to meet that need and show us a faithful way forward. His writing is immersed in Scripture, and he has laid out the material with clarity and wisdom. His loving and compassionate shepherd's heart can be heard in every word he writes. Steve's research has answered many of the nagging questions we had (Was it my fault? Is it sin? How can we live with hope?) He opened our eyes to a way of navigating the complexities as we trust God's word and live by faith. The Lord has used him to restore joy in our family. Thank you, Steve, for this much-needed resource for Christian families!"

Parents (name withheld)

"As an adult who has lived with gender dysphoria all my life, I appreciate what Pastor Froehlich has written. One refreshing aspect of his writings is that he stops short of classifying treatment options as 'moral' or 'immoral' for all gender dysphoric people in a 'one-size-fits-all' fashion. There are some in the Christian community who feel as if they can speak conclusively on the subject, when the information we currently have from the Bible and medical science is better suited to speaking of possibilities. It is a real possibility that an intersex condition underlies at least some forms of gender dysphoria. In intersex situations, where different aspects of the body give contradictory indications of sex, the Bible does not tell us which aspect (or combination of aspects) takes precedence. While people will have opinions about this, they should be recognized as opinions that lack the authority of a clear statement from the Bible. Many want to draw a bright line that none may cross, desiring to issue moral imperatives to every person with gender dysphoria without ever needing to meet them or learn how God (who knows their true sex) is leading them. Pastor Froehlich is an important voice in this discussion precisely because he does not fear the very real possibilities that lie on the other side of the lines that others have already drawn."

A friend (name withheld), seminary graduate, serving faithfully in vocational Christian ministry