

Not at home in the body - Christianity and the Transgender experience

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Series: Being Human

Texts: 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, Romans 8:18-27, Matthew 11:28-30

In his book *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church and what the Bible has to say*, Preston Sprinkle, records a number of people describing their gender dysphoria. One describes it as:

The-piercing-to-the-heart feeling when you feel like every single person in the room is staring at you. Like your heart is ripped open and they are just picking at the pieces. This may sound pretty harsh to someone who has never experienced gender dysphoria, however for me it happens in some degree almost every time I'm out in public spaces with people around me. It also happens before I get ready to go out, and this has become such a battle. Fighting just to leave my house and by the I have fought for hours at a time I'm exhausted and broken ... I feel inadequate, broken, and I just want to disappear.¹

We've been doing a series on *Being Human* and today we're looking at transgender experience. I've entitled the sermon, *Not at home in the body - Christianity and the transgender experience*, to pick up the apostle Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5, but also as a play on the trans experience - not feeling at home in the body, their own and also the body of Christ, the Church. This is a complex, deeply personal and, for many, painful subject. But we do no one any favours by ignoring it. In speaking on this topic I want to address two audiences. First is the trans person who may be here. If that's you, I'm so glad you're here. I want you to know that you are made and loved by God. You are precious in his sight. And this is the best place for you to be. My hope is that you hear God speaking to you today words of life and welcome and wisdom for how to live as his child. The second audience is the rest of us. My hope is that we would be better equipped to love our trans neighbours as ourselves, whether that's others at church, family members, friends, whoever. Ok, I recognise that there's a third audience - and that's if you're here and not a Christian. You can come along for the ride too!

Let's return to the trans experience we began with. Preston Sprinkle (yes, you won't forget that name!) suggests the fundamental question is,

If someone experiences incongruence between their biological sex and their internal sense of self, which one determines who they are - and why?²

I want to tease that out and suggest there are 4 points of reference in the conversation.

1. A person's experience.
2. That person's understanding of their experience and their sense of self.
3. The cultural narrative about their experience.

¹ Preston Sprinkle, *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church and what the Bible has to say*, David C Cook, 2021: 31-32

² Sprinkle, 24

4. The person's decisions about what they will do with their experience and how they will live. This operates on a societal level as governments and health professionals make decisions about how best to care for trans people.

We're going to consider each in turn.

We began with those quotes because some people do experience an incongruence between their biological sex and their internal sense of self. There's different language used to describe this - gender dysphoria is the current psychological term, although this is contested. Transgender is another. The term transgender is something of an umbrella term that covers the many ways in which people might experience and present their gender identities differently from those whose gender identity is congruent with their biological sex. Not all people who identify as trans would say they experience gender dysphoria, but for the purposes of this sermon I'll use them interchangeably. The term gender dysphoria highlights that for many people the experience of incongruence between their biological sex and internal sense of self is highly distressing. The rates of mental health challenges, self harm and suicide ideation are much higher for trans people than for the general community.³ This issue is fundamentally a pastoral one. And I would love for churches to be full of trans people because they need the love and care of the body of Christ.

Growing up as missionary kid in PNG my parents spent a lot of time talking about culture. One of the ways they described culture was as the glasses through which you see everything. Culture does not just shape how I see the world *out there*, it also affects how I see and understand *my own* experiences. This is part of the power and complexity of language. It aims to name reality. But at the same time it also shapes our experience of reality. This is certainly the case when it comes to the trans experience. Our language in this area has undergone enormous changes over the past 20-30 years and is still in flux. Positively this has brought to the surface caring for many people whose experiences have been marginalised. But the pace of linguistic change makes it sometimes difficult to navigate. And, while we recognise that language shapes our experience of reality, we must also recognise that language can obscure reality, or give us a false impression of reality.

If the words we use do shape our we both understand and experience the world, including ourselves, that means that culture is not neutral. The story you tell about the trans experience shapes that experience. For the Christian, part of our obedience to Christ means assessing that story under the light of God's revealed word in the Bible. But, and I cannot stress this enough, that is not to judge people. We can judge ideologies on their merits in light of Scripture, but we cannot judge people. We don't know the recesses of their hearts. Only God does.

So, for the next few moments, I want to outline the story our wealthy, Western and mostly white, culture tells about trans experience, and assess it in light of Scripture. You could summarise this story as, "be true to yourself". Yourself here is your internal sense of self, your mind or perhaps even

³ <https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/mental-health-findings-lgbtq-australians> accessed 11.9.24

your soul. This determines what gender you are, not your sex assigned at birth. The latter is an imposition of society upon you. So if your internal sense of self conflicts with your biological sex, the problem is not your mind, it's your body, and the meanings society has placed upon it. You have an obligation to be authentic, to live out who you are. And society must recognise and affirm your authenticity. Then through medical technology you can change your body to fit your gender identity, first through hormone therapy, then through gender affirmation surgery. Rigid gender norms are seen as a form of oppression that not only inhibits individual freedom to be yourself but also harms non-conforming individuals through shame and stigma.

How might the Bible respond to this story? Let's draw together some of the threads of what we've been exploring in this series *Being Human*, particularly with respect to our bodies. We are embodied creatures. We're made male and female and it's through our sexed bodies that we image God in the world. Our bodies reveal who we are. Philosophically whether we say the mind is just part of the body, or that we are body and soul, Biblically we cannot separate body and mind or body and soul. They go together. It's only through our bodies that we make manifest our inner life. Our bodies are a gift from God. God declares our bodily existence to be very good. In Psalm 139 we read that we're "fearfully and wonderfully made", that God has knit us together in our mother's womb.⁴

We're also fallen. As such, our experience of bodily life is marked by hardship, struggle, suffering, sickness and death. We are afflicted in body and mind. The harmony of Eden is shattered. Things fall apart. God however has not abandoned us, rather he became one of us, sharing in our bodily existence in the person of Jesus. There could be no greater affirmation of the body than that the Son of God took on flesh, and indeed remains incarnate. In Jesus' resurrection we see the future that God has for our bodies. We will be raised to be like him, freed from all the conditions of the fall that make bodily life such a struggle. In Romans 8, Paul describes our present, bodily existence, as one of suffering, perseverance and hope. We, along with the rest of creation, are in bondage to decay, longing for the freedom and restoration of the new creation where all things are healed. "We groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies".⁵

Intersex

One of the arguments that always comes up in debates around transgender identities is "what about people with intersex conditions?" It's played almost as a gotcha card, If intersex people exist then gender identity must trump biological sex in cases of incongruity. The argument is that intersex shows that sex is not binary but a spectrum, and therefore gender is also a spectrum. There are several shortcomings with this argument. First and most importantly, it dehumanises people with intersex conditions, reducing them to rhetorical fodder. Second, it conflates intersex conditions with transgender experience. While intersex people may have trans experiences, they are not the same thing. One is physiological, the other is psycho-social. Third, it misunderstands the biological

⁴ Psalm 139:13-14

⁵ Romans 8.18-23

realities of intersex conditions. Intersex is an umbrella term for what are called “differences of sexual development” (DSDs) or “congenital conditions of sexual development” (CCSDs). The majority of DSDs don’t result in sexual ambiguity, but what about the 0.018% of whose biological sex is ambiguous?⁶ Are they a third sex?

At this point we can make the mistake of reducing biological sex to secondary sex characteristics - like breast size or genital appearance. But secondary sex characteristics develop as a consequence of sex. Sex however is how the whole body is structured to produce gametes - either sperm cells or egg cells. That is, sex is how the body is organised for reproduction. Even in the rarest intersex conditions where an individual can develop both ovarian and testicular tissue, they will still only be able to produce either one gamete or the other, not both.⁷ Or, put another way, “though some intersex people embody traits from both categories, there are still only two categories of sex.”⁸

The limits of freedom

One way that you could read the attempt to change our bodies through chemical and surgical means is an attempt to bring in the conditions of the resurrection through technology. I think this is the fruit of Western culture’s commitment to freedom and technology. Freedom is seen as abolishing the limits placed upon us by religion, society and even nature itself. Technology is the means by which we can achieve greater freedom. Freedom and technology are in symbiotic relationship.⁹ But freedom can metastasise into the will to power. We are the masters who through technology can bend creation to our will. It’s a corrupted form of the creation mandate in Genesis where humanity is given the task of ruling creation after the pattern of God’s own loving care. It forgets that we too are creatures not God, made of the dust of the earth, even while we are animated by the breath of God. Now that is not to say this move is a conscious choice by the trans person. Rather they are in a society which thinks like this, which has for the last several hundred years been shaped by that symbiotic relationship between freedom and technology to see limits as obstacles to be overcome. The call for the Christian is to receive the created order, even ourselves, as the good gift of God. And to acknowledge that there are limits to what we should do with technology.¹⁰

Further the ideological framework for theorists like Judith Butler is one which is explicitly immanent. There is no resurrection and no new creation. This life is all there is. People are in distress. We have the technology. Why should we not relieve their suffering? But not all wounds in this life will be healed. “We groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling.”¹¹ Yet in the strange alchemy of grace, suffering can produce perseverance, perseverance character, and character

⁶ See Sprinkle, *Embodied*, 117-122. Cf. Favale, *Genesis of Gender*, 124-129

⁷ Abigail Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, Ignatius, 2022: 127-129

⁸ Sprinkle, *Embodied*, 122

⁹ Oliver O’Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* Oxford, 1984: 5-6

¹⁰ Cf. O’Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* 12

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 5.2

hope. And God promises, “hope does not disappoint because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”¹²

Practical and Ethical considerations

It seems to me that the trans experience is one of disintegration and a longing for wholeness. But the “affirming” path seeks to force the body to reveal the true inner self, rather than receiving the body as the gift of God, a body which is revealing who I am. To relieve the distress of the mind it counsels inflicting wounds upon a healthy body. This in contrast to a more holistic approach that seeks psychological therapy and considers ways to manage distress without causing physical harm. I’m reminded of Paul’s phrase in 1 Timothy where some “have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs”¹³. This is one of the grave practical and ethical considerations when it comes to transitioning. Chemical and surgical interventions on the body have irreversible impacts, even if people detransition. Once you start interfering with your body’s endocrine system, that means you will be on drugs for the rest of your life either way. Surgery is obviously invasive and can lead to ongoing complications. For those who detransition, you cannot remake what has been destroyed.¹⁴ In April this year, the landmark Cass Report into Youth gender medicine from the UK found that the evidence that most research that underpins clinical guidelines, hormone treatments and puberty blockers is shaky.¹⁵

A word on gender norms.

If we take gender to refer to the psychological, social and cultural aspects of being male or female, the Bible is remarkably light on the ground when it comes to outlining *how* we should be male or female, apart from our roles in the family - as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. It’s much more interested in *character*, that applies to everyone, irrespective of their sex. Texts like Deuteronomy 22.5 and 1 Corinthians 11.2-16 suggest as Christians we should maintain distinctions in how we dress between male and female. This recognises the social meaning indicated by our clothes and also the created reality that we image God as male and female. But the Bible’s invitation for Christians is not so much to act like a man or a woman, but rather to act like Jesus, who is our example of true humanity. We might take God’s words to the prophet Samuel as instructive, “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”¹⁶

¹² Romans 5.3-5

¹³ 1 Timothy 6.10

¹⁴ For women this can include, vaginal atrophy or severe dryness, strong pelvic pain, high blood pressure, kidney and liver issues, urinary incontinence, retaining higher levels of body and facial hair. Even without surgery, long term testosterone use destroys female reproductive organs. The long term effects of puberty blockers are not known, but there is concern about bone density and brain function. Cross sex hormones render a person infertile, reduce or eliminate sexual function and can lead to cardiovascular problems, breast cancer and liver damage. Taken from <https://post-trans.com/DeTransition-Booklet>

¹⁵

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/10/gender-medicine-built-on-shaky-foundations-cass-review-finds>

¹⁶ 1 Samuel 16.7

There's one more thing that needs to be said about our bodies from a Biblical perspective. And that is that our bodies are sacred. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; **20** you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.

This is astonishing news for all of us who have felt not at home in our bodies in all their messiness, acne, ambiguity, aches and pains, dare I add also dysphoria. We might not feel at home in them, but God delights to make his home in them in the person of the Holy Spirit. While Jesus dignifies all of humanity in his incarnation and resurrection, the Holy Spirit does this personally for each and every person who would trust in Christ. For the Christian, our bodies become a place for worship. As God has honoured us by taking up residence in our bodies, so we are called to honour God with our bodies.

Loving our trans siblings and neighbours

So far I've been speaking to the trans person, particularly if they are a follower of Christ. What about how the rest of us in the body of Christ can love our trans neighbours, and especially if they are our siblings in Christ? It's important to stress that we may encounter people at any stage in their life's journey, in this case from someone who is thinking about changing pronouns through to someone who has fully surgically transitioned. Every person's experience is different. I come back to the point I made earlier, while we can judge ideologies, we cannot judge people. But we are called to love them. What might this look like?

One of the things I found kept coming up as I prepared for this sermon is that again and again trans people reported so much of their trans journey happened online through social media, youtube, tumblr, online forums and so on. For me this raises alarm bells, especially for teens and young people. I don't know anyone who has been a teenager who did not find living in their body hard, stressful and confusing. The online world is disembodied and abstracted from real flesh and blood relationships with people who see and who know you. The airbrushed presenter on youtube doesn't know you or your story. For me this is one of the wonderful things that the church can offer. A real flesh and blood community where you belong, that is made up of all kinds of people from all walks of life, who are being reminded week in week out to live a life of love. It's here that you can be seen, and known and loved and find people to confide in who will walk alongside you through all circumstances. It seems to me that this is what we all need, trans people included. It is a great grief to me that it seems so many trans people don't feel they can come to church.

Pope Francis in his letter *Evangelii gaudium* (the joy of the Gospel) speaks about the art of accompaniment, which he says begins by teaching us "to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other."¹⁷ It's a beautiful way of putting it. How can we accompany the trans person on their journey deeper into the heart of Christ? That is the destination. What does Jesus say?

¹⁷ Favale, *Genesis of Gender*, 209

28 ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.’¹⁸

This is the same journey that we are all on, a journey towards the wholeness and integration that will only fully come at the resurrection. That journey rarely, if ever, is a straight line. It is often one with many detours. While we may point people to the truth of God’s word, we must also come with open ears and humble hearts. With a conviction that it is not us, but only the Holy Spirit who has the wisdom and tenderness to put the broken pieces of each of our lives together. In that sense I cannot counsel an “affirming” path of social and medical transition. But nor can I close the door on it.

Accompaniment evokes the need for community. We need others to journey with us. It is in the company of other believers we find the Holy Spirit gently at work in us to make us like Christ. How might we accompany the trans person? First we must listen. We need to hear the stories of trans people in the church. This is actually a project that Andrea Hensher has been undertaking for the LOVE Diversity working group for the Diocese. Second we must be prepared to “bear other’s burdens” as Paul puts it in Galatians 6. This means being prepared to sit with things being uncomfortable and unresolved. Too often we try to seek resolution simply to make ourselves feel better. But that is self serving rather than serving our trans neighbours in love. We’re called to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice.¹⁹ Third, we are called to be hospitable. Trans people are told they will be rejected by the church. Let’s prove that wrong. For me, this is why I’m comfortable using people’s preferred pronouns - as a gesture of hospitality to say “I see you. I respect you. I want to hear your story.”

All of this means that we can expect church to be gloriously messy. It’s why we’re doing no one any favours if we get fixated on enforcing rigid gender stereotypes. The circumstances and complexities of each person’s story are an opportunity for the rest of us to love with all the creativity and joy and patience of the Holy Spirit. Each step on the transitioning process brings with it different complexities, and so too what discipleship might look like from that point. But, as Sprinkle writes, the church is “a community of radical misfits, called into a motley family with grace and truth where no one should walk alone.”²⁰

Evening Collect for Peace

Eternal God, from whom all holy desires, all good purposes, and all just works proceed: give to your servants that peace which the world cannot give; that our hearts may be set to obey your commandments, and that being defended by you from the fear of our enemies, we may pass our time in rest and quietness; through the merits of Jesus Christ our saviour. Amen.

¹⁸ Matthew 11.28-29

¹⁹ Romans 12.15

²⁰ Sprinkle, *Embodied*, 197

Resources

Abigail Favale, *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory*, Ignatius, 2022

Preston Sprinkle, *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church and what the Bible has to say*, David C Cook, 2021

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Scandinavian Bishops Pastoral Letter on Human Sexuality.

<https://catholicoutlook.org/scandinavian-bishops-conference-issues-pastoral-letter-on-human-sexuality/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/10/gender-medicine-built-on-shaky-foundations-cass-review-finds>

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