

GENDER

THE APPROACH OF MARINERS CHURCH

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Although the question of how the Church should respond to recent transgender theories¹ and show Christ's love to people wondering about their gender identity² is relatively new in church history, the theological truths and biblical principles undergirding these discussions are beautiful and timeless. Mariners Church is committed to glorifying God and loving people—pointing them toward joy in God in every part of their lives. What we believe about the human body, and how we seek to pursue obedience in glorifying God in our bodies, is an important aspect of discipleship in our historical and cultural context. It also represents a powerful opportunity to honor God and shepherd people toward wholeness in Him, with clarity, compassion, and joy.

TWO COMMON VIEWS OF TRANSGENDER THEORIES AND GENDER IDENTITY

1. The View of Bodies as Primarily Self-Determined Objects

The increasingly widespread acceptance of recent transgender theories is rooted not as much in politics or progressive political theory as in the philosophies of materialism, the Romantic movement, and the rise of expressive individualism.³ The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor points out that for more than 150 years now, “the cosmos is no longer seen as the embodiment of meaningful order which can define the good for us”—a shift that has given rise to a view of the human body (and all other aspects of the created world) as subjective tools, disconnected from moral and destined purposes, and therefore available to be used however the individual sees fit toward whatever ends the individual chooses.

Simply put, if there is no designer, there is no need to consider anything outside the individual in the pursuit of happiness or self-actualization. This view promotes the individual as the supreme authority in matters related to the body and denies or diminishes the importance of original design and the notion of universal standards of morality and purpose. If there is no God, no right design for the human body, and no source of joy defined outside the self, then we should offer unlimited freedom for people to express their inner essence and determine their own identity and meaning.

This understanding of the human body and its purpose is at odds with the Scriptural teaching on the goodness of God’s creation.

2. A Reductionist Treatment of Gender Questions

In some religious or political spaces, it is common for people to engage in debates over gender identity theoretically rather than personally. The tendency in such cases is to speak more to the concept than to the person—to declare the desire for bodily transformation to be illogical without seeking to understand and sympathize with people in distress.

A reductionist treatment of gender confusion disconnects the questions being asked about biology, philosophy, and theology from the people who are wrestling with them. On another topic related to sexuality, Preston Sprinkle writes: “If the church is ever going to solve this issue, it needs to stop seeing it as an ‘issue’... [it is] about people who need to love and be loved.”⁵

A quick fix solution to questions of gender identity, without careful listening and demonstrations of love for the people involved, is at odds with God’s Word on service, humility, and discipleship. Christians, as people who have experienced the brokenness of our world and believe in the promise of redemption, should be the greatest source of compassion toward someone struggling with their gender identity. As Sam Allberry has said: “Our churches should be the places people feel most safe trying to articulate their own sense of not being right.”⁶

SO WHERE IS MARINERS?

Our mission is to inspire people to follow Jesus and fearlessly change the world. We want to point people to Jesus because we believe that trusting and following Him is the best thing that can happen to anybody. Jesus is not simply someone we consult; He is the Son of God, and everything was created by Him, through Him, and for Him (Col 1:16). As the Creator and Designer of the human body, and the ultimate standard of what is right, beautiful, and joyful, Jesus knows better than anyone what is necessary for humans to flourish and find fulfillment. The Scriptures declare the human body as good (Gen 1:31), wonderful and intentionally designed (Ps 139:13-14).

It is easy today for some, out of the desire to be loving, to defend and affirm every longing someone might express and any decision someone might make regarding their bodies. To question or disagree with someone’s personal belief and choice today gets interpreted as an attack on someone’s worth or personhood. But we believe the way of Jesus is the only path to experiencing a sense of worth that lasts, the integration of body and soul, and eternal satisfaction.

This means that as a church we aim to disciple people toward health and satisfaction within God’s design for our minds and bodies through loving, compassionate, and honest relationships. It is not loving to defend something harmful, and we believe an amoral, mechanistic view of the body, disconnected from the mind, denies the goodness of creation. But neither is it loving to be dismissive or derogatory toward the pain of people whose experience of gender does not correspond to their bodies as given by God.

The way of Jesus leads His Church to help others experience the goodness of God’s creation and design. This means Christians must engage in discussions about gender and the body from a teleological perspective—that all design implies a designer and a purpose in creation. Even as we offer “a positive biblical worldview that affirms the value of the body and the unity of the human being... Christians should be the first to support [those experiencing the pain of gender dysphoria] by affirming the diversity of gifts and temperaments in the body of Christ.”⁷

When people experience the compassion of Christ and encounter the message of Christ, they respond by surrendering their lives, identities, and desires to Christ and thereby find their ultimate purpose and joy in Him and in His design. When we inspire people to follow Jesus, we help them find the One who answers the deeper longings present in questions related to gender identity.

THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The aim of Mariners Church is to be biblical—to address whatever Scripture addresses, believing that God's Word is always relevant, true, and good. The following points help us carefully consider how we should respond to questions about gender identity within our church.

1. God created male and female bodies.

When God invented natural bodies, He created, in His own image, both male and female, and then blessed them (Gen 1:27-28). The fact that we are made in God's image is astonishing. God designed the human body by both physical and supernatural means. "The Lord God formed the man out of the dust from the ground and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and the man became a living being" (Gen 2:7). This description has led the Church to a high view of the human body.

God values our bodies and how we use them. The Spirit of God indwells His people, and God calls us to treat the body He made as holy, sacred, and set apart (1 Cor 3:16-17). We are to glorify God with our bodies (1 Cor 6:19-2). In light of God's mercies, we are to use our bodies to worship Him and be "transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God" (Rom 12:1-2). God's plan is for the body of a believer to be a living sacrifice and for the mind to be transformed and renewed.

2. The body and soul are intended to be integrated.

God created the body and soul to work together for His good purposes. The Scriptures speak of the integration of the body and soul in the pursuit of satisfaction in God. "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Ps 63:1). Here we see both body and soul described in the psalmist's yearning for wholeness in the Lord. A similar note is sounded in Proverbs, regarding the commands of the Lord: "Don't lose sight of them; keep them within your heart. For they are life to those who find them, and health to one's whole body" (Prov 4:20-22, emphasis added). God designed the body and soul to work together, so that fully integrated human beings will be satisfied in Him.

3. The world is broken.

The world as it was first intended to be—a world in which men and women thrive, experiencing fellowship with God, fully integrated in body and soul—is not the world we live in. As a result of humanity's rebellion against the good purposes of God, the world is painful, broken, and cursed (Gen 3). We sinned, and now nothing is as it should be, including the mind's relationship with the body.

This reality is at the core of transgenderism and gender dysphoria. A BBC film titled Transgender Kids says, "At the heart of the debate about transgender children is the idea that your brain can be at war with your body." This is true, but Scripture

would broaden that statement to include nearly every area of life. The Apostle Paul acknowledges the disjunction of mind and body: “For in my inner self I delight in God’s law, but I see a different law in the parts of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and taking me prisoner to the law of sin in the parts of my body” (Rom 7:22-23). This is the consequence of a broken world upon our minds and bodies.

The question we must answer is whether a struggle between the mind and the body related to gender should be resolved by altering one’s body or seeking to adjust one’s thoughts and feelings. Even in a broken world, God’s Word maintains the truth of the body as beautiful, valuable, and good. For this reason, when a person feels disconnected from their biological sex, the goal is to help them bring their feelings in line with the body they’ve been given, not to alter their body to match their inner feeling.

In saying this, the Church must not minimize the difficult experience of someone with gender dysphoria—when one’s inner sense of self does not correspond with one’s biological sex. In a sense, all Christians can relate, at least at some level, to the struggle of seeking to live according to God’s design in a broken world. In many ways (though usually not as difficult), our inner sense of self may not correspond to the reality we face as embodied people in a fallen world. The Apostle Paul paints a picture of creation in distress: “For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together with labor pains until now. Not only that, but we ourselves who have the Spirit as the firstfruits—we also groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:22-23). As pastor Jon Tyson has said, “We weep for the world that is, we long to remember the world that was, we long for the world that will be.”⁸

It is the responsibility of the follower of Jesus to long for the world as God intends it to be and to help others experience that world as much as possible until He makes all things new. We believe that “someday God is going to renew creation. So not only will the feeling of dysphoria be removed, but the conditions that give rise to dysphoria in the first place will be eradicated as well.”⁹

4. God gives identities which supersede all other identities.

The Christian finds encouragement in Gal 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Through the work and word of Jesus, Christians experience what could never be experienced without Him—to be a new version of ourselves we could not be on our own. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!” (2 Cor 5:17).

As believers, we are called by God not only to lean into His original, good purposes within a broken world, but to rely on Him as the One who makes a life of redemption possible. When He does this work in us, He invites us to new, satisfying, unfading identities that are intended to take joyous precedence over all other good, God-given identities, including gender and ethnicity (Gal 3:28). The Apostle Peter invites God’s people into the higher, everlasting identities of those who are in Christ Jesus: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9).

5. Jesus is our example and our hope.

Jesus is a Savior unlike any other. He not only saves His people, but He suffered like His people. He entered a world marked by fallenness and sin to bring us into glory (Heb 2:10). He experienced the brokenness of His body so that we could be made whole (Is 53:4-5).

As Christians, we do not merely call our friends who struggle with their gender identity to a different lifestyle; we call them to a different love. Jesus loves transgender persons. He gave His life for them and wants them to experience wholeness—body and soul—through His death and resurrection. Even death—the ultimate disintegration between body and soul—will not have the last word, as Christ promises a new Heaven and a new Earth which we will inhabit glorified, resurrected bodies, and body and soul will be fully and eternally united forever. With this hope, the Church must lean into love toward people wrestling with questions about their gender.

WHAT THIS DOES AND DOESN'T MEAN

1. We shepherd people away from gender transitions, toward God's design.

We want to be a church that helps people experience the life God designed for them. This implies a high view of the body and a call to renew the mind and discipline the body rather than transition the body to align with the mind.

We believe that Christians struggling with gender dysphoria can “see their struggles with dysphoria from the proper perspective. The struggles are real and afflicting and painful, but they are not the defining aspect of who that person is. That person’s identity lies in being a child of God, walking towards being home with Him. Their feelings are not a barrier to experiencing joy.”¹⁰ We want to help people fight for the joy available in God’s higher view of the body, helping them honor the natural body rather than altering it chemically or surgically.

We recognize that some transgender persons will seek to follow Jesus after having “transitioned.” With mercy and grace, we seek to be the body of Christ, “a place where casualties from the sexual revolution can find hope and transformation.”¹¹ As a church, we must learn to love and serve people through the pain of past decisions as they discover their precious identity as made in God’s image and walk through a long process of re-identifying with the body God has given them. Remembering the restoration we’ve needed and still need in Jesus, we love and bear with our brothers and sisters on this journey.

2. We seek to serve intersex individuals.

God’s design of humanity in the binary of male and female has been broken not only by the fall’s effects in the mind, but also in the body. Intersex individuals deal with biological brokenness just as those born with heart murmurs or blindness does. The important point, as it relates to the discussion of gender theories, is that intersex does not represent a range between male and female, but a biological abnormality in our binary gender world. The Intersex Society of North America has said, “Intersex people are perfectly comfortable adopting either a male or female gender identity and are not seeking a genderless society...”¹² Christians should serve and support the intersex individuals as we would anyone else who may have ongoing medical needs.

3. Minimize pronoun conflict.

We want to love people wherever they are in their spiritual journey while seeking always to speak the truth with grace. In many cases, agreeing to use a person’s preferred pronouns can create division and confusion. “The best solution is to avoid pronouns altogether if possible. Calling a person by their legal name is more acceptable because names are not objectively

gendered.”¹³ We seek to avoid conflict in this area, so as not to be needlessly offensive to a transgender person, even as we seek to avoid giving the impression that we affirm or agree with a self-perception that does not correspond with God’s gift of the body.

Rather than focusing on pronouns, we want to focus on the person and redirect the emphasis from what they are called to how they are loved. When talking to someone, pronouns are not often used, only when talking about someone. In these cases, we do our best to honor and respect people by using their names. That allows us to love and relate to anyone, regardless of pronoun preference.

4. Provide biblical community to people with different gender expressions.

The mind, the body, and this broken world are all complex. Though there is still no conclusive scientific evidence claiming that gender dysphoria is genetically caused, it is evident that many people feel mentally and emotionally disconnected from their biological sex.

This discomfort expresses itself in different, unique ways, but the overarching biblical approach is the same. We want to invite those with gender-related struggles to experience biblical community and the truth of God’s word. We want the opportunity to understand their story and the opportunity to shepherd them toward associating gender with the body God originally designed for wholeness and joy. We want to point everyone struggling with these challenges to the design of God, the healing of repentance, and the joy of Jesus.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Transgender is an “umbrella term for many experiences of gender identity that do not align normatively with a person’s biological sex.” Yarhouse, Mark and Julia Sadusky, Emerging Gender Identities: *Understanding the Diverse Experiences of Today’s Youth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2000), 5.
- 2 “Gender identity is a person’s self-perception of whether they are male or female, masculine or feminine.” Walker, Andrew T., God and the Transgender Debate: *What Does the Bible Actually Say About Gender Identity?* (The Good Book Company, 2017), 34.
- 3 O. Carter Snead defines expressive individualism in this way: Individualism: “The fundamental unit of human reality is the individual person, considered as separate and distinct from the manner in which he is or is not embedded in a web of social relations. Persons are identified with and defined by the exercise of their will—their capacity for choosing in accordance with their wants and desires.” Expressive: “Individuals thrive insofar as they are able to freely create and pursue the unique projects and future-directed plans that reflect their deeply held values and self-understanding. These projects and purposes emerge from within the self; neither nature, ‘natural givens,’ nor even the species-specific endowments and limits of the human body dictate the end of individual flourishing.” *What It Means to Be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 69-70. See also Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020)
- 4 Taylor, Charles. Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 148-9.
- 5 Sprinkle, Preston. *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 20.
- 6 Allberry, Sam. “What Christianity Alone Offers Transgender Persons.”
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-christianity-alone-offers-transgender-persons/>
- 7 Pearcey, Nancy R., *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019), 194.
- 8 Tyson, Jon, “The Controversial Jesus - Jesus, Gender, and the Trans Community.” 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IS2oIkfYNwc>
- 9 Walker, Andrew T., *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say About Gender Identity?* (The Good Book Company, 2017), 91.
- 10 Walker, Andrew T., *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say About Gender Identity?* (The Good Book Company, 2017), 94.
- 11 Pearcey, Nancy R., *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019), 224.
- 12 Pearcey, Nancy R., *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019), 219.
- 13 Walker, Andrew T., *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say About Gender Identity?* (The Good Book Company, 2017), 165.