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The ADC Disciple

Anabaptist Disciples of Christ is an affiliation of Conservative Anabaptist churches seeking likeminded fellowship, instruction, and accountability in church administration and congregational life in the Biblical pattern of the Apostolic church.

A Christian Response to Gender Dysphoria

Seeking Faithfulness To God's Design

by John Coblentz

Editor's note - The issue of transgenderism has become a divisive, inflammatory "hot button" in our contemporary society. How would Jesus respond to gender dysphoria? John Coblentz has written a pertinent, excellent article from a Biblical perspective addressing this issue.

In recent decades our culture has shifted significantly on how people identify their gender. The increased emphases on individualism, personal fulfillment, and sex as recreation are certainly contributors to the gender confusion. One can be virtually anything one can imagine, and others are pressured to affirm those feelings and imaginations or to be labeled as haters.

I want to clarify here that gender confusion and same-sex attractions are related issues and sometimes overlap in a person's experience, but in this brief article, I will be focusing on gender confusion with only occasional references to same-sex attractions. I would like to paint a few broad theological strokes from Scripture, consider some of the challenges we are facing, and finally, offer a number of Christian responses.

Scriptural Guidance

For believers, our story starts in the beginning when God created everything. Concerning humans specifically, we read God saying, "*'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them*" (Genesis 1:26, 27).[1]

As humans, then, we understand that we are made in God's likeness (setting us apart from the rest of creation) and that our likeness to God is split into male and female. We are not told in the creation story what all it means to be male and female, but the obvious physical characteristics reflect the deeper differences in roles. The man is the initiator, the seed planter. The woman is the receiver, the one who bears the offspring. He is designed to carry the heavier loads, to protect and provide. She is designed to nurse the young ones, to nurture and care for them. The physical differences correspond to deeper distinctions in the soul. And we assume that it takes both male and female to reflect God's likeness.

Unfortunately, the human story scarcely began until it was marred by sin and the terrible consequences of the curse. The result of sin was alienation from God with all the attendant sorrow, thorns, disease, mutation, selfishness, conflict, and death. Men learned to use their strength for dominance over women. Women learned to use their beauty and emotional sensitivity to manipulate men.

While we lament the implications for us—the sorrows we endure as a result of our selfish ways—the greater tragedy is the way we sin against our Creator and His good intentions for us. We fall terribly short of the glory of God. From a theological standpoint, the current gender confusion is far more serious than making a mess of human relationships and families. It is plunging us further from our ability and responsibility to reflect our likeness to the image of God.

In making us male and female and commissioning us to multiply and replenish the earth, God was making us image bearers in our very design. Two people becoming one in a deep and committed love for each other reflects the oneness in multiplicity of the triune God. Two people in oneness producing offspring reflect the creative power of God. Humans do not have equality with God—what He is in infinity, we are in finiteness—but we reflect His image.

Again, sin has marred us. But in redemption, we are called back to live according to God's design, not drift further from it. We believe that males should live and function as men in harmony with their male physicality, that women should live and function as women in harmony with their female physicality, and that masculinity and femininity combine to reflect the image of God.

The effects of sin were not only in our souls, but also in our physicality. Some babies are born mentally handicapped. Some genetic lines are more susceptible to depression or other mood disorders. Occasionally a baby is born with indeterminate sex distinction, with confused genitalia.

More difficult to trace to genetics or physicality are strong inclinations to sin in specific ways. Some individuals seem to have a heightened susceptibility to lying, others to stealing, and others to anger. And how shall we understand those who are attracted

sexually to children, or those who have same-sex attractions, or those who identify as the gender opposite to their physical sex?

The homosexual community has long declared their attractions to be an inborn orientation. No genetic research has been able to confirm this, however, and much less a genetic or physical cause for a mismatched gender.

We believe that neither genetic mutations that confuse gender nor inclinations to deviate from one's physical sex either in orientation or in sexual preferences are reasons for departing from God's guidelines for human sexuality. "...the differences between male and female reproductive structures are integral to God's design for self-conception as male or female. We deny that physical anomalies or psychological conditions nullify the God-appointed link between biological sex and self-conception as male or female."[2]

Cultural Confusion

In our culture today, increasing numbers of people are experiencing gender confusion. A young woman does not always feel like a woman. She may be drawn more to thinking and acting like a man and may not enjoy typical female conversations or activities. Similarly, a boy or young man may be drawn to thinking and acting like a woman. For some people, this may be a mild or passing stage. For others it continues into adulthood.

In recent years, high profile cases of people switching genders have brought the issue to the fore. Bruce Jenner, famous for winning the 1976 men's decathlon in record-breaking style, came out as transgender in 2015 after fathering six children in three marriages. He changed his name to Caitlyn and became a poster figure for the transgender community. Caitlyn was featured on the cover of Vanity Fair, and proponents gushed, "Jenner is finally herself."[3]

One result of these shifts is a multiplication of gender and sexual identities. We can hardly keep up with the variety of labels people are using to identify their sexual preferences. In June, 2019, Tinder (a popular dating site) expanded their gender options from the typical two to more than fifty, with nine sexualities.

But the confusion is not limited to gender identity. Social controversy has stormed around the use of restrooms. As society has been pressured to recognize biological males identifying as females and vice versa, it has raised the issue of which restroom a transgender person may use in schools, in restaurants, and in other public places. The confusion is amplified by the reality that some "trans" people actually identify as having a fluid sexuality—they can be attracted to either gender, they can identify as either, or they can identify as neither.

This also creates controversy and confusion in sports. Bruce Jenner's record in the 1976 men's decathlon has been broken a number of times since by male athletes. But had he competed as a female, the record would still stand. Is it fair for biological males who identify as females to compete against biological females? Some events now require competitors to pass physical examinations and testing in an attempt to keep the competition fair. Again, the fluid sexuality of some people makes this even more confusing.

Christian Responses

How shall we respond to gender dysphoria? I offer the following responses.

1. We believe that we should faithfully uphold the biblical norms of male and female.

We do not need to dispute that a person with a female body may be more drawn to typically male behaviors and inclinations, or that a male may be more comfortable with female conversations and typically female activities. But we should call people to live in accord with their physiology.

This is not to say that everything culturally associated with male or female is automatically so. There is nothing morally wrong with a male enjoying cooking or sewing or caring for babies — activities that our culture normally associates with women's interests. Nor is there anything wrong with a woman enjoying farm work or mechanical repairs or fishing—activities we might associate with male interests.

What we are saying is that we should affirm the goodness of identifying as male or female according to our physiology. A man with a male body is creating confusion for himself and for others if he intentionally feeds ideas, feelings, or behaviors contrary to his biology. Specifically, such things as cross dressing, affecting feminine mannerisms, or taking hormone replacement therapy violate his gender identity. The same would be true for a woman who intentionally resists or attempts to change her biological identity. To reduce gender identity to what one feels about sexual or gender impulses is to create personal, relational, and societal confusion.

2. Christians should treat people with gender confusion with respect, kindness, and compassion.

Those who experience gender dysphoria, particularly those who grow up in Christian settings, typically experience significant confusion and shame. With this issue, as with other human problems, there seems to be a spectrum from mild to very strong. Those whose urges seem strong and who may have fed opposite-gender urges for some years will typically have behaviors and mannerisms that don't fit the norm. Unfortunately, even in Christian settings, these oddities are sometimes mocked. A boy may be scorned for not enjoying hunting or mocked for the way he holds his hands or for his feminine interests. A girl may be called a tomboy.

In the Christian community, responsible adults need to address these unkind behaviors and guide their children or young people toward respectful responses. We should have zero tolerance for bullying, ridicule, and social rejection. On the positive side, adults need to engage children and youths who show signs of struggling with their gender identity. Children and young people with gender confusion will almost invariably experience shame, anxiety, inner conflict, and loneliness. The adults in their lives need to provide opportunities for them to talk about their feelings about themselves.

Furthermore, depending on the child or young person's personality and interpersonal habits, he or she may be both experiencing and contributing to interpersonal tensions. As indicated above, they may be experiencing mockery or rejection. They may also have strange fixations that others find difficult to understand. They may be pushy with their ideas, critical of others, and provocative, making interaction unpleasant for their peers and family members. If parents and teachers address these issues primarily with strong disciplinary measures, harshness, or forcing certain behavioral changes, and neglect kind and understanding relationship, these approaches can further alienate and embitter the child.

The inner world of those who struggle with gender confusion is typically so emotionally potent that they may be quite unaware of how they are affecting others. At the same time, they can be very tuned to how others are affecting them. Their accounts of interactions with others—both pleasant and unpleasant—may differ considerably from how others talk about those same interactions. It is helpful to realize that these ways of relating are because their inner world is so alive with the trauma of being different. When people attempt to address these unpleasant behaviors without understanding the deeper confusion and trauma, they may increase the feelings of alienation for the struggling child. While all children need to experience respect and kindness, any child who struggles with identity issues for whatever reason has even greater yearning to be treated in this way.

3. Christians need to call people with gender confusion to love God first of all and then to love others.

We live in a culture that has made the individual king. We are a culture of selfies.

Christians believe that all personal desires and dreams must yield to the "big picture." We believe God is. We believe God's creative intentions were for our good. We believe humans sinned against God and have been alienated from Him by our sin. We believe God has launched a redemptive plan through His Son to restore us to Himself and to make us what we were designed to be.

Life is not about fulfilling our dreams but about joining with God's good intentions. This means rejecting whatever counters His design, even when that is personally costly. To follow Jesus requires denying ourselves, specifically turning from selfish and sinful inclinations and toward loving God and loving others.

There are countless examples of Christians who have denied themselves even of legitimate things because of their love for God. A man may give up a high-paying job to serve as a missionary. A woman may forego marriage for the same reason. A son might put off college for a couple of years because his family needs his help. A pastor might reduce his work hours to serve his congregation more effectively. All of these are examples of Christians sacrificing individual preferences because of the bigger picture—they are part of God's great work. Loving Him and loving others guides them.

How much more should we give up behaviors or dreams that are contrary to God's guidelines or intentions! A man who is sexually attracted to children refuses to live out those desires. A woman whose husband has divorced her does not remarry while her husband is living, even though being single is difficult. A man with same-sex attractions chooses to live singly rather than live out what feels natural to him.[4] A wife whose husband does not meet her emotional and spiritual needs learns to live with the ache of emptiness rather than looking to another man to fill those needs. A man whose wife has turned angry and bitter and who will not even sleep with him chooses to live faithfully and refuses to gratify himself with other women either online or in person. All these are examples of Christians who accept the individual cost of being faithful to God's ways because of the bigger picture.

Even so, a Christian woman who "feels" like a man and a Christian man who "feels" like a woman choose to align themselves with their biology because they are committed to the larger good. God's design for men expressing their sexuality in the masculine role and women expressing their sexuality in the feminine role aligns with His will for solid families and strong societies. We are acting in His likeness as we align with His creative, productive design. Conversely, same-sex relationships, transgender identities, and fluid gender and sexual expressions violate our design and our likeness to our Creator. The willingness of men and women to deny urgings and feelings contrary to God's design and align their lives, even at personal cost, with God's design demonstrates a fundamental reality: Humans were made for God's glory. Consequently, life is meaningful and fulfilling when we dedicate all that we are to Him, and it turns empty when we live for ourselves.

Those who are born with abnormal or gender-indistinct biology are certainly persons who need the support and love of the Christian community. Jesus referenced their situation when talking to His disciples about marriage. *"There are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb"* (Matthew 19:12). Although they may not be able to fulfill the normal male or female role in a marriage, they can still live in loving relationship with God and contribute to His kingdom.

The Christian posture toward those with same-sex attractions and gender dysphoria needs to be one of compassion and understanding but also one that is unafraid to call people to align with God's design in creation and redemption. We believe in a grace that forgives all human sin. We believe in a grace that receives penitent sinners. We believe in a grace that enables repentant sinners to say no to sin. We do not believe in a grace that blesses or approves of people continuing to live in sin.

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:11-12). *"For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ"* (Jude 4).

We live in a challenging time. In his book *Making Choices*, Peter Kreeft quotes Thomas More, "The times are never so bad that a good man cannot live in them." Kreeft goes on to say, "Bad times are no excuse for bad choices and bad lives. . . . Bad times are for good people and good people are for bad times."[5]

This is our time, and this is a time to call people respectfully but clearly to be faithful to God's design for human sexuality.

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1 I'm using the NKJV throughout this article.
2 https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/ Article 5
3 https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/06/caitlynjenner-bruce-cover-annie-leibovitz
4 See, for example, Washed and Waiting*, by Wesley Hill*
5 Peter Kreeft, Making Choices*, (Servant Publications, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1990), pp. 1, 7*

John Coblentz is an instructor and the campus pastor at Faith Builders. He is a speaker and writer of numerous books addressing marriage, family life, and Christian living. This article is an adaptation of his presentation at the Administrators Conference in 2017.

ADC Church Profile —

Agape Christian Church, Berlin, Ohio was founded in 2008. Bill Mullet was instrumental in helping the church become established.

The current pastoral team consists of Luke Stutzman (retired Lead Pastor); Jerry Kline Jr. – Lead Pastor; Kim Eichorn – Associate Pastor; and Junior Schlabach and Lael Stutzman – Elders.

Current membership is 30.

Agape is involved in Canton Cross Club; Calvario Church in Nicaragua; and serves at a homeless shelter.

Agape became involved with the Calvario Church when the youth of Agape as well as several married couples went to Nicaragua in 2012 to help Pastor Vincente's church build several houses for his members. The church was able to do a similar trip two years later as well.

PASTOR SPOTLIGHT

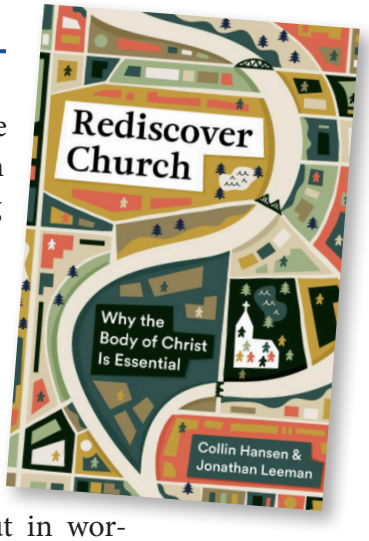
Jake and Christine Frey serve at Berea Christian Fellowship, Nappanee, Indiana. Jake was ordained as Pastor December 7, 2014. They have five sons – Darrell, Derek, Justin, Brian, and Jayden. Jake is a self-employed roofing contractor.

Jake reflects on his pastoral journey: "Being able to serve this way has been an incredible blessing in several ways. Serving alongside Pastor James Yoder and the rest of the team has shown me what genuine servant leadership looks like and has helped develop myself in this capacity as well. In addition, when serving in this role, whether in preaching, teaching, mentoring, or counseling, somehow it always seems God wants to do a work in our own hearts first. Being active in God's Kingdom necessitates that God has free reign in our own hearts."

Jake also recommends the book *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship* by Peter Scazzero. "It is one of the most influential books I've read recently. I would recommend this book to anyone, especially to pastors and leaders."

Thank you Jake and Charlene for your service to the Church!

Book Review



In the book *Rediscover Church: Why the Body of Christ is Essential* (Crossway, 2021) authors Collin Hansen and Jonathan Leeman call the reader to rediscover the importance of a local church body meeting together regularly, especially in a post-COVID church environment. While a "virtual church" was necessary for a time, the authors argue that "a church is a people assembled in a place" (page 49); while a church does not stop being a church when its people aren't gathered, "regularly gathering together is necessary for a church to be a church" (page 49).

The pandemic necessitated virtual platforms for many churches, especially in mainline evangelical circles. However, the authors argue that a healthy church in meeting together learns from one another, encourages and corrects one another, and most importantly, loves one another. Church was meant to be done shoulder to shoulder in an assembly in obedience to the Scripture that exhorts believers to "consider how to stir up one another in love and good works, *not neglecting to meet together,* as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:24-25, emphasis added). Jesus Himself gave importance to the assembly of believers – *"Where two or three are gathered in my name,* there I am among them" (Matthew 18:20, emphasis added.) The push for a virtual church tends to individualize Christianity through its convenience and it allows us to avoid "messy" relationships. However, it is really in the messiness of relationships that love can also become "messy" and be fleshed out.

This book impacted me not because the pandemic affected us at Haven dramatically; instead, I rediscovered something that I believe I take so much for granted – the assembly of the believers. We as Anabaptists place a high value on the very points that the authors make in this book. We expect to see our members come through our doors Sunday morning and "rubbing shoulders" with each other. The whole service is made possible by many people who show up Sunday morning and do their parts - ushering; having devotions; teaching Sunday School; leading out in worship; and preaching the Word of God. May the familiar never lose its importance and value. I'm grateful for the sense of belonging and community that has been fostered in our Anabaptist circles.

I expected to read a chapter on the centrality of preaching and teaching; chapters dealing with membership accountability and even church discipline were a mild surprise for me. My surprise was evidenced by the following statement: "But the challenge new technologies pose to churches didn't begin just yesterday. We're not the first to observe that the automobile effectively ended church discipline for many churches" (page 142). I would have expected that statement to come from an Amish minister rather than an evangelical 😊.

Chapters on loving members who are different and accepting outsiders challenged me. Church isn't just for people who have their act together and who think, look, and talk like I do. Jesus called both Matthew and Simon the Zealot – people who wouldn't have been natural allies and friends - to be part of the Twelve.

I would highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to rediscover the beauty and importance of the assembly of a local body of believers.

- Nate Yoder, Editor

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