

Gender & Identity

The Push for a Three-Box World

Your daughter, who is away at college, announces she is dropping out and relocating across the country to move in with her boyfriend. Months later, you hear that she broke up with him to move in with a girl who is not just a new roommate but a new partner. Next, you discover on social media that she has changed her name and pronouns to they/them.

Your sister, a single mom, is raising her five-year-old son, Jared, by herself. It's been a while since they've visited. When you next hear from her, she tells you that Jared is now Jacey and asks you to use that name and refer to Jacey as she/her when they visit soon.

Your son is in high school. His appearance begins to change, and he withdraws from usual activities. You ask what's happening, but he manages to dodge the issue. Then, you learn that he is using a new name online and identifies as nonbinary at school.

These kinds of scenarios have become increasingly common in recent years. Nothing may quite rise to the height of identity confusion, disorientation, and turmoil than feeling or believing that you were born in the wrong body. The mental, emotional, relational, and spiritual pain and suffering these circumstances produce is profound. The personal distress of those dealing with these feelings is one thing. The impact on relationships, especially with family members, is another.

Many concepts and terms have entered the vocabulary when conversing about human sexuality in our time: transgenderism, new pronouns, gender fluidity, gender-affirming care, sex assigned at birth, puberty blockers, drag queen story hour, bathroom controversies, biological men in women's sports and women's prisons, birthing persons, chest-feeding, transitioning, de-transitioning, etc.

Gender Dysphoria

At the center of much of the talk is "Gender Dysphoria," a diagnosis that appeared in the DSM-V (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition) in 2013. It replaced the previous diagnosis of "gender identity disorder" to remove the stigma associated with the term "disorder." The term "dysphoria" itself is a profound state of unease and dissatisfaction and is used apart from gender issues. In the DSM-V, gender dysphoria is defined as "A marked incongruence between one's experienced/expressed gender and natal gender."

Since Adam and Eve exchanged paradise for a pair of fig leaves to cover their nakedness and shame,

there has been plenty of dysphoria and incongruence to go around. Cain was supposed to be his brother's keeper, but his jealousy led him to murder him instead. Jacob was to wait his turn, but impatience and dissatisfaction led to him stealing his brother's birthright. King David was to lead God's people by example, but his royal lust led to adultery and murder. Peter said he would defend Jesus even if it cost him his life, but in his unease, he became a denier rather than a defender. Jesus chose Judas to watch the money, but in his dissatisfaction, he went from guardian to greedy and betrayed Jesus for a handful of silver coins. The Pharisees and teachers of the law should have been the first to recognize and welcome the Messiah when He arrived, but, in their 'incongruence' with the one God sent, rather than welcome, they devised a sinister plan to have Him killed.

Who of us in our nakedness, shame, unease, disease, dissatisfaction, incongruence, fear, greed, jealousy, and hatred haven't abandoned who we are or who we were meant to be in favor of being our own god, taking what doesn't belong to us, abandoning God's good gifts, refusing to be content with who we are and what we have?

Jesus' Example

The only fully congruent human being who has ever lived is Jesus. He knew who He was and why He came from heaven to earth. John 1:14 informs us that the Word (Jesus) took on flesh, made His dwelling among us, and that this Word is "full of grace and truth." Jesus interacted with people with these two 'elements': grace and truth.

Jesus uses grace and truth as He interacts with the woman at the well in John 4. Tired from His journey, He stopped to sit and rest at a well. A lone Samaritan woman comes to draw water and Jesus asks her for a drink. She is startled by His request. He shouldn't have spoken to her. He should have walked away. Jesus then speaks to the woman about the living water that wells up to eternal life. Jesus violates social, cultural, and religious norms to build a relationship with this woman.

As we interact with those who are struggling with gender identity issues or their family and friends, Jesus would have us follow His example and lead with grace and compassion. Questioning whether oneself is male or female, or somewhere in between, can be very isolating and put a person at odds, not only with oneself, but also with others. This topic elicits strong feelings and reactions.

Jesus first offered proximity, connection, and relationship. Listen to the person's story, ask open-ended questions, be friendly and inquisitive. By showing interest and willingness to have a conversation, you gain a hearing. Water sounded good to the woman at the well, yet she didn't know exactly what Jesus was offering.

Then look for an opportunity to share or dialog about truth. Jesus says, "Go, call your husband, and

come back," and she answers, "I have no husband." Jesus then lays on some truth, some reality: "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true."

We can't peer into people's hearts or know their histories and circumstances like Jesus. But our questions may prompt a person to give a second thought to what they are doing and where they are going. Think of it as putting a pebble in someone's shoe. It's gradually annoying. You can live with it for a while, but there comes a time when you have to stop, take the shoe off, deal with the problem, and see where the pain is coming from.

Good questions might lead someone to reflect on the "pebbles," the serious issues at hand. Building trust in a relationship opens the door for them to ask what you know. We are always to be ready to testify to the hope we have in Jesus and to do so with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). We do not speak on our own authority, but rather the authority of the God who knit us together in our mother's womb (Psalm 139:13) and created us in His image (Genesis 1:27).

Jesus does not browbeat this woman about her disordered life or stand in judgment or condemnation. Neither does Jesus avoid having a hard conversation. In love, He states the truth and invites this woman to the source of living water, to a new life in Him.

What's Happening in the World

Asserting one's individuality and personal autonomy might seem like a worthwhile pursuit, but as Oswald Chambers wrote, "Individuality is all elbows, it separates and isolates. God wants to bring you into union with Himself, but unless you are willing to give up your right to yourself He cannot" (My Utmost for His Highest, 1963, Barbour and Co. Westwood, NJ, p. 346).

Forces are aligning to move Western culture away from the male and female two-box gender reality to add a third box labeled "other." What, exactly, should go in the box labeled "other"? No one knows for sure. Check the box and decide what to put in later as you discover your "authentic self." The phrase "gender-fluid" captures the nature of the movement as new gender identities are steadily emerging. In 2014, Facebook offered over 50 gender identification options beyond male and female. Today, a Google search reveals over 80 gender options. Where is it all headed? What is the goal?

Not everyone in Jesus' day, or even today, is interested in what Jesus had to say about the sexes, marriage, or a host of other topics. Unsurprisingly, those who reject the Author of life (Acts 3:15) reject His teaching about the realities of life, whether physical or spiritual. Paul identifies the central problem: "They exchanged the truth about God for

a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen" (Romans 1:25 NIV).

What Jesus Says

Interestingly, Jesus' gender reveal party and His mission statement were recorded by Isaiah 700 years before He was born: "For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given" (Is. 9:6 NKJV) and "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Is. 61:1,2 NIV) Jesus identified Himself as the fulfillment of those words after He read this passage in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:18-19).

The Good News is that Jesus loves us no matter what we are struggling with. He meets us where we are, but never leaves us there. As our Good Shepherd He "leads us beside quiet waters" and "through the valleys" (Psalm 23). Whatever binds us, Jesus came to free us from sin and its consequences with His love and forgiveness through His shed blood on the cross. Where blindness has set in, Jesus comes to open eyes to His truth and grace. For the oppressed, Jesus proclaims liberty and the Lord's favor. God can use you to make a difference in the lives of those who are confused, broken, parched, deceived, burdened, and heartbroken. With our intentions and conversations bathed in prayer, we can offer the unconditional love, grace, and forgiveness of the Savior. The Holy Spirit is the only one who can convict people of sin and disordered living and bring them to repentance and faith in Christ.

Our bodies matter. They aren't for us to do with as we please. Your body is as much you as your soul, mind, and spirit. The Bible teaches, and Jesus promises, the resurrection of the body. "You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19b-20 NIV). May your third box be marked, "Follower of Jesus."



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