

# God & the Transgender Conversation

Good morning everyone! As always, it's great to see you. My name is Eric and I'm a pastor in training here. If I haven't had the chance to meet you officially, I'd love to have the chance after we're done today. We are officially on the final week of our series about gender and the bible.

We've talked about a pretty big spectrum of topics under the umbrella of gender. We've talked about how men and women are *both* created in God's image with equal value and worth. We've talked about what it means to live into how we were each distinctly created and what it looks like to express Christlikeness as men and women. We've talked about friendships between men and women in a way that reflects the love of Jesus and really puts into practice the idea that we as followers of Jesus are family with one another. And we've talked about marriage.

We are now rounding things out with what I'm hoping will be a helpful conversation about transgender identities. I want to say right off the bat this morning that I know this is a difficult topic for a lot of people for a lot of different reasons. It can come with a lot of baggage and assumptions and stigmas and struggles and plenty of other things I can't think of right now. The experience of trans people can be a difficult thing to *bring up* in conversation, much less talk about in detail, and much less than that talk about in detail in a church setting. And a lot of the reason is because everyone's experience is different, but also because *everyone* has an opinion. And no matter how neutral you might think you are, we are all formed by something. As much as we all want to think we're totally individual thinkers, we don't exist in a vacuum. And if we aren't formed by Scripture *first*, we'll tend to interpret things through whatever lens we've developed.

I want to start things off today by really emphasizing something. We have *got* to remember in all of this that we are talking about people. Real people. Real lives. Real souls. Real struggles, real pain, real hurt, a *real* need to be loved. Not just statistics, not talking points, not political ammunition, not tools for whatever argument you want to make, but people who need to experience the deep love of Jesus. We're talking about parents, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, coworkers, classmates, *real people*. Tragically, when people get caught up in angry debates, they often lose sight of the humanity of this topic. And it can go so poorly. In fact, we didn't plan it this way, but today, November 20 is actually known as the annual Transgender Day of Remembrance. Today commemorates people who have lost their lives as a result of anger and violence against transgender people.

To help with some tension people might feel today, I want to briefly communicate what I am *not* going to do this morning. In the next forty or so minutes, I am *not* going to be making a case for what laws should or shouldn't be passed in our country affecting trans people. I'm *not* advocating for any laws to be passed or not passed around pronoun usage or bathroom policies. I'm not even making a case for how *all people* should think about their gender or their experience of gender.

Now, obviously, I am a follower of Jesus and on staff at a church—so I do believe that God's design for all aspects of life is the best possible design to live out of. But I also believe that living out of that design doesn't *start* with changing your view of gender or sexuality or finances or anything else—it *starts* with encountering God through Jesus, and having your heart changed by him. So if you're here this morning and haven't yet *experienced* that, I wouldn't necessarily expect a ton of what we say up here this morning to be compelling to you. Because at least most of it is assuming that you have experienced that relationship and therefore have a trust in the authority of the Scriptures over your life.

So this morning, I'm not so much up here saying "this is how every person on planet earth *must* start thinking about gender, effective immediately." I'm more up here to say, "if you're a follower of Jesus, and therefore trust the Scriptures as authoritative over your life, here is what they teach about how you think about gender." Do you hear the difference?

So with that out of the way, let me give you a quick outline on what I *am* going to cover... This morning, I want to break up what we are talking about into two big picture questions. The first is: **how should followers of Jesus think about trans identities?** The second is: **how should followers of Jesus interact with and relate to trans people?** But let's start off with a definition.

When I say "transgender," it is a broad umbrella term, and I want to acknowledge that there isn't really *one* universally accepted definition out there. So I want to try to use one that I feel like sums up the main idea of several different understandings of it for our purposes this morning. Essentially "transgender" is this: **describing or relating to people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth.**

So a person who is born biologically male, but whose lived experience feels to them to be more characteristically that of a woman, might identify as trans. A person who is born biologically female, but whose experience doesn't seem to them to resonate much with that of a man *or* a woman, might also identify as trans. And dozens of other experiences along those lines. Any and all of that might lead a person to identify as trans, or as some

type of trans-adjacent identity. Okay, I have one last big picture disclaimer, then we can jump in.

The topic of transgenerness and all the conversations surrounding the topic is immense, so it would obviously be impossible to cover every single aspect of it today in sufficient detail. So as a reminder, If there's anything you were hoping I would mention or any questions that come up for you, you can still go to our website and submit questions anonymously. I would also highly recommend a book by an excellent author and speaker named Preston Sprinkle called "*Embodied*."

So I'm nearly 10 minutes in and have only really given disclaimers and a long-winded introduction, because to be completely honest, I wasn't sure the best way to introduce everything. So I just compressed a bunch of thoughts as much as I could without rambling too much and here we are. Has anyone ever actually read the "terms and agreements" before checking the box saying you read it? That's basically what they sound like, disclaimers on disclaimers. So now that I'm done with my fifth disclaimer, let's *finally* dive into that first question I mentioned.

### How should followers of Jesus think about trans identities?

Well first, asking what the bible says about that subject is a little like asking *what does the bible say about credit cards?* In one sense, the bible doesn't say *anything* about credit cards, because "credit cards" is a modern term. If you go to [biblegateway.com](http://biblegateway.com) and do a search for the term "credit card" in the whole bible, it will return exactly zero results.

But at the same time, does that mean that the bible says *absolutely nothing* about the way followers of Jesus think about and approach credit cards? *Not at all*. Because the bible has *lots* to say about the way we use our money, the way we think about possessions. It says lots about the dangers of materialism and cautions against taking on unnecessary debt and the effects of that debt. So while the bible may never use the term "credit card," there is actually a *lot* to *glean from* the bible about how followers of Jesus should think about and approach credit cards.

I think that's similar to what the bible says about the experience of transgender people. While the bible doesn't use that specific term (because it's a modern term), the bible actually has a *lot* to say about how we think about our gender, our sense of self, our humanity, and our bodies. And all of *that* has direct *implications* for how we *think about*

the experience of trans people. So let me break down some of the most *significant* ideas on this topic from the bible under three headings. First one...

## The bible affirms the dignity of the human body.

To put this one another way, for followers of Jesus, the body is *essential* to our image bearing status. In Genesis 1, which we covered in week 2 of the series, it says:

*God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

Our bodies are the *very next thing* that gets mentioned after the fact that we are made in God's image. There's plenty else we could say (and *did* say in other parts of this series) about that verse. But for right now, I just want you to see that the bible sees the human body as a *very significant* part of the original creation. In other words, our bodies are *good*. They're *important*. They're *essential*. God doesn't create people as ethereal *souls* and then go "well I guess it might help for them to have a container, how about this thing called a body?" He creates people as *embodied* souls.

The bible actually upholds and affirms the dignity—even the *sacredness*—of the physical body. In the bible's view, we're much *more* than flesh and blood, to be sure, but we're also not *less* than flesh and blood. We see this idea affirmed throughout the New Testament in how Paul stresses the importance of the body. One of the clearest places to see this is in 1 Corinthians 6, where Paul says this:

*Do you not know that your (catch this) **bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?** (notice the unbelievable importance there placed on the body: *temples of the Holy Spirit*. And then look at this language) **You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.**<sup>1</sup>*

Notice that Paul in this passage uses the word "you" as *synonymous* with "your body." "*Did you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit...you are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.*" Is Paul talking about the *Corinthians themselves*, or is he talking about the *Corinthians' physical bodies*? Yes. He's talking about *both*, because they're one in the same. **Our bodies are not secondary to us. Our bodies are us.**

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

This is why some people say *not* to say things to a person of color like, “I’m not racist because I’m *colorblind*.” And the reasoning is *that* statement seems like it is implying that their *skin, their body*, is somehow separate from or different from the *real them*. “I don’t see your body, I see *you*.” But I don’t have to pretend I don’t see the color of a person’s skin in order to love them. Loving how God made them, and their ethnicity, and their culture is part of how I love them. Because their bodies are a part of them. Now, people of color are also *way more* than their bodies and the color of their skin, but they aren’t less than the color of their skin. And I shouldn’t feel like I have to disconnect them from their bodies to love them. That is a disembodied view of humanity and it can be deeply harmful. And I’d argue the same logic applies with other aspects of the body too. We shouldn’t operate out of that separated mindset with the way we view our *sexed* bodies either.

Which leads us to the second thing we see in the Scriptures, which is that...

### **The bible draws no distinction between our *bodies* and our *gender*.**

**The bible, at every point, operates as if one’s biological sex is determinative of one’s gender.** And *that*, really, is to put it *gently*; let me now put it even more *plainly*. **The bible does not operate as if there is any *difference* between one’s biological sex, and one’s gender.** *Eve is said to be biologically female, and therefore a woman. Adam is said to be biologically male, and therefore a man.* **There actually isn’t an example in the bible of a person’s gender being *distinct*, or different *from*, their biological sex.**

Maybe in response to that, you would say “that’s just because people back then didn’t *know* that biological sex and gender were different things. Or they didn’t know they *could* be different things.” Maybe in your mind, people back then likely had very one-dimensional understandings of what a *man* was, and what a *woman* was—so it would be outside of the bible’s purview to talk about biological sex and gender as *different and distinct from one another*. But there are some problems with that thinking. One is that it places us as modern people outside of and above the authority of the Scriptures. Which, at least if you’re a follower of Jesus, is a pretty dangerous move to make.

But second, that is kind of an uninformed view of early societies. Cultures back then had gender stereotypes, just like we do. *Some* of those stereotypes were quite *similar* to ours. And people back then, just like us, had people whose lived experiences fell *outside* those gender norms. But to them, that didn’t mean those people *weren’t* their biological sex, or that biological sex was at *odds* with their gender identity—it just meant they were having a different kind of experience *within* their biological sex. **Because to them, and**

**to most human societies throughout the history of the world, there has been no distinction between a person’s biological sex, and a person’s internal sense of gender.**

Now to that, you might ask: *what about intersex people?* Some people say that since *some people are born without clear indicators of being male or female, that must mean that sex, and therefore gender, is more of a spectrum than it is a binary.* If intersex people exist, that means that there must be more categories than just male or female, man or woman. So does the bible say anything about *intersex* people? Believe it or not, it *does*. In Matthew 19, Jesus is answering a question about marriage and divorce. And in part of his answer, he says this:

*For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.<sup>2</sup>*

Eunuchs, if you’re unfamiliar with the term, were a specific class of people who were unable to participate in typical male/female sexual relationships for a variety of reasons or conditions. Sometimes their conditions left them without clear indications, based on their physiological make-up, of being men or women. Jesus in this passage gives us three *categories* of eunuchs. One of them are eunuchs “who were born that way.” *That*, best we can tell, would include people who were *born* without clear, unambiguous signs of being male or female.

There’s a couple of reasons that’s significant. First, notice the dignity Jesus bestows on people in that situation. He doesn’t choose, like culture at the time would have, to call them deformed, or second-class citizens, or anything of the sort. In fact, he uses their existence as a way of explaining and highlighting a noble calling of singleness to his disciples. Jesus actually upholds and affirms the dignity of people whose experiences don’t fit neatly in the categories of “male” or “female.”

**And at the same time, within this very same conversation, Jesus upholds the teaching of Genesis 1 that God created humanity “male and female.”<sup>3</sup>** He reiterates that there are two categories of humans, determined by people’s biological make-up. In other words, yes—exceptions to the rule do exist. And those people should be loved and accepted and cared for and seen as the image-bearers of God they are. *And* it is still true that God created humanity as male and female. Two categories, with grace and compassion and understanding for those who fall *outside* of those categories. **The**

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 19:12

<sup>3</sup> See Matthew 19:4

**categories don't diminish or disparage the exceptions, and the exceptions don't nullify the categories.** Do you see why Jesus was such a compelling teacher, and yet frustrated most everybody at the same time?

So the teaching of the Scriptures, beginning to end, teach that God makes humanity in two categories: *male*, and *female*. And because the Bible upholds the dignity of the body as part of us, it also views our sexed bodies as determinative of our gender. Third idea...

### Following Jesus means living in alignment with the body God gave you.

On a number of occasions in the Scriptures, God instructs his people to live *in line with*, and not rebel against, the male or female body God gave them. I'll give you one example from the Old Testament and one from the New. Here's the *Old Testament* one:

*A woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a woman's cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God.<sup>4</sup>*

So that's pretty direct. Some of us might even be *uncomfortable* with how direct it is. And maybe you hear that and go, "yeah, but don't Christians have a complicated relationship with the Old Testament?" And to some extent, yes. There are some commands in the Old Testament that still directly apply to followers of Jesus today (like the ten commandments), and some commands that don't, like not eating shellfish. Unless you're allergic, but that's more general wisdom than biblical command.

But something interesting about this Old Testament command is that Paul actually seems to *echo* this same type of instruction in the *New Testament*. Most notably, in 1 Corinthians 11. I'm not gonna walk through the whole thing because it's an entire chapter of the bible, and there's plenty to get lost in. But I'd encourage you to go read it on your own time. There in that chapter, Paul seems to confirm that men who follow Jesus should not dress like or present themselves as women, and women should not dress like or present themselves as men. He even uses language that is strikingly similar to what we just read in Deuteronomy 22, which would make sense since Paul was *steeped* in the Old Testament Scriptures.

Now, here's what's *interesting* about the instructions he gives in 1 Corinthians. The *specific application* of his instructions are culturally informed. He cites long hair versus short hair, and head coverings versus no head coverings. Those were both *cultural norms* for how women and men dressed and presented themselves in first-century Corinth: women had *long* hair; *men* had short hair. *Women* wore head coverings; *men*

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<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 22:5 (ESV)

didn't. Now, almost all scholars would agree that followers of Jesus don't need to abide by the *specific applications* of the principle Paul gives. **Men: if you have long hair, you don't need to repent by cutting it off. Women: you're allowed to have short hair.**

But while the specific applications of the principle don't apply, the *principle* Paul gives absolutely does. It is still true that followers of Jesus shouldn't strive to present themselves in appearance as the opposite sex. Because following Jesus looks like making an effort to live in alignment with the body God gave you.

Now, you might ask: what things does that include? What types of things does that mean a man shouldn't wear and a woman should, and vice versa? And that is an excellent question. One that I do not have time to answer. I simply can't take that deep of a dive this morning. But I'll do everyone a favor (submit the question). I do think there is room for healthy debate among followers of Jesus about what that refers to and what it doesn't as far as specific application. But I will say this: **it has to mean something. If Paul's principle has no bearing or application at all for us as followers of Jesus, I think we need to look again.** Fair?

So that brings us to the conclusion of our *first* question, **how should followers of Jesus think about transgender identities?** Believe it or not, that was all just the answer to one question. But I think a complex topic like this one requires nuanced answers, so I felt like it was worth being long-winded for the sake of clarity. But I think those three ideas I just laid out give us a pretty good foundation for thinking about this subject well as followers of Jesus.

Now, before I use my remaining *moments* to answer the second question, I just want to reiterate: everything I just laid out summarizes how *followers of Jesus* should think about transgender identities. How *followers of Jesus* should think about those things. *Followers of Jesus*. I'm being very repetitive right now because I'm trying to get ahead of something. If you take those three ideas, and go "awesome...I'm pumped to take these three points and use them to show my liberal neighbor or my transgender coworker how wrong they are," you have *entirely* missed the point. Those three ideas will not make sense (nor should they) to a person who has not accepted the authority of God as mediated through the Scriptures. Those are for *you*, not for them. At least right now.

Now, if you have someone in your life who claims to know and *follow* Jesus, and *they* want to know how to think about these things well, those three ideas could be *very* helpful for them. But they're not for anybody and everybody, nor should we use them as if they are. And those conversations happen within the context of meaningful, intentional



*relationships* with people, not in comment sections or social media. Clear on that? Okay. With that addressed, let's tackle our second question:

## How should followers of Jesus *interact with and relate to trans people?*

We've talked about what we should *know and believe* about humanity, our bodies, and our gender. Now let's talk about how we should *relate* to people we know or may *come* to know, who identify as being transgender. I've got two words for you...

### *...with understanding.*

The way that you and I, and every follower of Jesus on the planet, should relate to their transgender neighbors, coworkers, classmates, friends, and family members is with an incredible amount of *understanding*. An *understanding* of their struggle. An *understanding* of their dissatisfaction. And an *understanding* of their experience. Now maybe you hear that and think: "but see...that's just the thing...I *don't* understand it. I don't understand it at all." Maybe you've been sitting here listening to me talk about gender and gender ideology and intersex people and men presenting themselves as women—and you've been thinking to yourself, "this is like a whole different *world* than the one I live in. I don't even fully understand all the *words* we're using right now, much less know how to relate to someone going through something like this." Maybe it feels like for you, the *last* thing you're going to be able to do is *understand* where transgender people are coming from.

But I want to ask you to consider something with me. Maybe you've never once had even the *slightest moment* of doubt about your gender or gender identity. Maybe that's never been a struggle for you. And that's fine. But can I ask you this: have you ever taken a moment and looked in the mirror, and *not liked* what you saw looking back at you? Maybe it was something physical: you didn't like the *appearance* of the person looking back at you. You didn't like the *size* of the person looking back at you. You didn't like all the wrinkles in all the wrong places and in way too *many* places. You didn't like the *ethnicity* of the person looking back at you.

Maybe it's *not* physical at all. Maybe you look in the mirror and what you see is all the *decisions* you've made through the years that have made your life a *mess* today. Maybe you look in the mirror and you see the cumulative effect of a long line of failures to be who you were supposed to be, to do what you were supposed to do. Maybe you look at the mirror and you hear the condemnation of a father or a mother or a family member

who *made sure you knew* about all those failures whenever they happened. Or maybe you look in the mirror and have to immediately look away because of the harm that has been done to the person in the reflection, and every glimpse at that person is just one more reminder of it.

Have you ever felt any of *that*? I would imagine at least a lot of us have. Have you ever felt like something was *wrong* with you? Have you ever felt like something is *broken* about you? Something is dysfunctional, disconnected, distorted, warped beyond what it is supposed to be. Have you ever had *that* experience before as a human being? You see the Scriptures make the case that whether or not we've ever struggled with our sense of gender or gender identity, *all* of us have had our view of ourselves impacted by sin.

When Adam and Eve decided to sin against God, it *broke* something in the very fabric of God's creation. Because sin entered the human story, we don't see *God* like we could. We don't see *others* like we should. We don't see *creation* like we should. And we don't even see *ourselves* like we should. Now, when we look in that mirror, we don't see an image-bearer of God, cherished by God. We see brokenness and incompleteness. We see failure and inadequacy. We see *wrongness*. And pretty much *all* of us have felt a version of that.

So here's my point: if you've felt that, you at least have *some* level of understanding to offer a person who is trans. I'm not saying it's the exact same—that would be a silly thing to imply. We're all on different journeys and each person's journey is unique. Each *trans person's* journey is different from every other *trans* person. If you've met one trans person, you've met *one trans person*. But I *am* saying that if you've ever felt like something about you was *wrong, off, broken*—then you do actually have some amount of understanding to offer any person in the *world*, going through *any* type of experience.. Because that's the *human* experience. And much like Jesus' response to all of us, you have deep *compassion* to offer.

But it doesn't stop there. The bible tells us something else about that experience that you absolutely must know: that for followers of Jesus, that experience is also *temporary*. Look with me at Romans 8 up on the screen:

*We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*

That is Paul describing the brokenness of the world that we all feel the effects of. *Groaning*. "The *pains of childbirth*." Part of being human is looking around at the world

and going “this just *isn't* like it's supposed to be.” This is not what life is supposed to feel like. This isn't what truth and goodness and justice and beauty is supposed to look like. Something is *broken* here. He goes on, v. 23:

*Not only so* (in other words, not only does the *world in general* feel that way), *but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, (and, please don't miss this next phrase...) the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.*

So just like we said earlier, it's not just that the *world* is broken...we are broken. Our *bodies* are broken. Our view of ourselves, our *understanding* of ourselves, and even our relationship to our *bodies* are broken. But Paul says there is coming a day when that's not true anymore. One day in the future, for followers of Jesus, God will bring the *redemption* of our bodies. Not the *discarding* of our bodies. Not shedding our bodies and floating about as disembodied souls in the clouds. He says the *redemption* of our *bodies*. The things that are broken about the way we view God, and each other, and creation itself will be set right.

*And* the things that are broken about the way we view *ourselves* will be set right. If you're listening to this and struggle with any amount of relationship to your body, hear me say this: God is not indifferent to your experience. In fact, he plans to do something *about* it. And in the meantime, he wants to walk with you *through* it. He wants to provide other people who love him and love you to walk with you through it.

Which is why it matters so much for all of us to have *understanding and compassion* for one another. When we realize we are a part of the same story as others, it grants us the ability to have *understanding*. I may not completely comprehend every minute detail of another person's struggle, but I sure know what it feels like to struggle. Sure, I may not completely feel the exact things that they feel, but I do *feel*. Because I'm a part of the same story God is writing. The story that started with *intention*, was briefly disrupted by *transgression*, and is one day going to end with *redemption*. So in order for us to look more like Jesus in the ways we interact with others, we need to remember that we're all part of that story. And that should inform every part of our lives, including the way we treat others.