

Is Your Church Ready for the Gender Revolution?

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No doubt, you've heard the cacophony that socially surrounds us **about gender**. I'm certain that as a pastor, you may have even dealt with a 'situation' which involved *some aspect of gender*—perhaps a confused youth; or a worried parent who came to you thinking that their child wasn't acting "right" for their "sex." (I assume they may have used the word "sex" to describe *gender*, probably wrongly.)

Or, as my pastor confided a few weeks ago, *"I'm hearing about gender and all its social issues nearly all the time now, but I feel unprepared for this tsunami. How do I prepare?"*

More to the point, how do we help **the church** prepare?

The more global question is, ***Are we as a Church prepared to understand and minister through the gender revolution?***

Much as homosexuality and sexual orientation became a counterpoint of discussion and issue for the last two decades of the 20th century, I predict *gender* and *gender identity* will be the focal elements of contention for the Church in the first half of our 21st century.

Perhaps rightly so—since this time around, *gender* issues aren't about men and women not getting along, *hierarchicality vs. complementarity*, or women in ministry and leadership. **This time it's about gender as an embodied identity**; about *gender as assigned vs. self-determined*. It's about whether your assigned *sex at birth* and the body you inhabit are out of discord—and thus, you have the right to bring it into accord through changing your physical sex, and thus your *identity*. Or, if that's too extreme, changing your self-presentation, name, pronoun, behaviors, so it all aligns with who you really believe and feel you are.

The present "gender moment" is far more about our capacity to distinguish bona fide psycho-medical conditions which need our recognition and attention, from the politicized voices seeking to erase all forms of sex/gender identifications save those a person chooses.

And in such a moment, the church needs a voice of clarity and conviction, full of knowledge. It also needs to acknowledge how we may have contributed to present gender troubles, so we can help by understanding, changing what we should, and facilitating mutual dialogue.

I'll discuss some ways ministers can prepare themselves to address the present "gender moment," as well as means by which they can assist their congregation to understand, minister to, and ultimately engage those with gender conflicts or transitions.

Knowing What You Don't Know

The new language that comes along with this gender moment is essential to understand, because it also reveals **contemporary ideologies** about sex, the body, the self, which can be a challenge to theological traditions, even doctrines. At the same time, the new language calls our

attention to possible misperceptions laid down long ago which we haven't revisited, about our human nature as well as how we come to our identities.

The first engagement should therefore be to **understand the new language**—and there's plenty of it: new terms; old terms with new meanings; and revisions to how we label, and *use* labels, on *another*. The new language also reveals ideologies of self-identification and self-representation that revise taken-for-granted understandings of the person, categories historically grounded on biological sex, and how these conform us to particular identities. Here are some terms that are essential to know from the beginning:

“Sex”— Such a minefield, this term. It can mean *intercourse*; or it can mean the biological **reproductive organs** of a person. It can also be a stand-in term for **sexual behavior of sundry sorts**, as well as a concretized “fact” of human creation: Male and female. Of late, **sex**, and the term **gender**, have been used as *synonyms* when they shouldn't be: **Sex** should refer to our biological parts (and what we can do with them); and **gender** should refer to our roles, schemas, *internalized* and based—if not wholly, certainly influentially—by the anatomical, *and* the person's social experiences.

“Gender”— In this sense, gender first appears as a psychological internalization of the sexual body – i.e., *I am male, therefore, “a man, masculine, etc.”* But that would shortchange the definition, particularly from what we know today about how gender is formed. Gender is *also* influenced by *social variables: socialization, gender schemas from society, roles one learns to enact*. All of these are consumed through **“gender socialization”**—which most of us do not escape as we grow in a culture with “givens” of what we should be like *because* we are males, or females. **Gender** is therefore best defined as the coalescing of all our understandings about ourselves that revolve around both our body and **our self-presentation, our role, and ideology of self**. **Gender is a socially constructed fact as well as an internalized experience.**

“Gender identity”— If *gender* is about role and behavior and prescriptives, **gender identity** is all about how one internalizes all this into a physical referent and self-concept. **Gender identity is therefore the internal self-perception an individual has about their biological sex, their gendered self, as well as about how they self-feel, self-represent, and self-identify.** All of which, we should note, underscores that the person has developed a sense of identity which is either *concordant* or *nonconcordant* with their body; their assigned sex; and their gendered role.

Confusion of Terms

Back to gender for some more information. Today, the term **gender** comes with a corollary (and oft misused) label: **“assignment.”** The notion that **‘gender is assigned’** at birth is a foreground piece in this new lexicon and ideology.

Far from such being correct, **gender isn't assigned at birth**: It develops as we interact with the sexual body, and it with society, social learning. It thus becomes that internalized perception *by the person, of themselves*. (True enough, a lot of this is guided by social constructions.) **Sex (not gender) is, however, normatively ‘assigned’ at birth, based on the genetic and/or reproductive anatomy that act as witness to that assignation.** Medical science instigates such

an assignment based on the sexual morphology. It follows that we then teach a child based on the *gender schema* which society sees as fitting the genitals. In that sense, *we push gender*, but there are many influences beyond that *'push'* to make gender a simple “assignment” at birth. Not correct.

The activism which has formed around gender inclusiveness, however, proclaims one was possibly assigned “**the wrong gender at birth**”; and consequently, has the right—*ought* have the right—to correct that.

Modern medicine provides a pathway to correction **if one is diagnosed *gender dysphoric*** (another term we need to understand well) through ***gender reassignment***. Reassignment (now called “*confirmation*”) can involve both hormonal and surgical processes which alter the physical body to “conform” it to its ‘correct’ gender—really meaning one’s psychological sexual identity.

So, to get it right here: if the term ***gender*** is used, and to it is added ‘***assigned***’, it presumes the person’s internal sense of self may well be out of alignment with what they believe. “I must have been [then] wrongly ***assigned*** at birth.”

First, let’s correct the nomenclature: **Sex** assigned at birth may well not *correspond* to what a person may be feeling. . . this is called ***gender dysphoria***, or a significant, persistent, inability to reconcile **one’s sexual body** with one’s ***gender identity***. But it’s not **mis-assigned *gender***: It’s an incongruity between one’s **sexual self-identity** and that which **one’s body** is saying one is.

Here’s the fact on this angle: ***Gender dysphoria***, *once well diagnosed* (and it does take a lot to appropriately diagnose dysphoria), is considered a psychiatric condition by the American Psychiatric Association, and is documented with diagnostic criteria in its encyclopedic manual, the DSM-5 (2017). So far, psychiatry cannot identify a point of origin for dysphoria, since physically and otherwise, gender dysphoric individuals are totally normal. The conclusion is, therefore, that the disjunction between mind/body **about *the sexual body*** is deeply rooted affectively, and thus, mostly intractable.

Separating Understanding, Hospitality, Patience, Acceptance, from Hostility

Many Christian denominations, especially conservative ones theologically, have put out position papers or ecumenical statements on their views of gender, transgenderism, and even intersexuality. Most conservative denominations do not pause to consider contemporary science, or even theological questions that have arisen *because of* the gender ‘moment.’

Instead, these repeat a theological anthropology of body and gender that reverts to Adam and Eve as *sui generis* models of what human beings—male and female (only)—ought be like, and thus, cement “God’s design.”

In a slight, creative departure from this norm, the Assemblies of God—an evangelical-pentecostal denomination with revivalist and holiness roots—has issued a position paper on transgenderism, transsexuality and gender identity (2017). It overviews these, and attempts theological responses based on tweaked Christian evangelical traditions.

Its conclusions suggest that dysphoric individuals who prioritize the “interior” over the “exterior” should not be judged as sinning. This is a stark departure from conservative

evangelical positions that see any sexual body alteration as an abomination and defilement of God's temple. While the denomination does not directly "embrace" a solution such as *gender reassignment surgery*, which alters the body for the sake of the self, the position paper cautions its membership and clergy **not to judge those that do** as if they were sinning. We'll return to this position later.

For now, it's wise to recognize well-diagnosed *gender dysphoria as a reality* for those affected by it, and the significant travail it often brings to the person, their family, when there is no easy solution to it. It's also wise to *understand* the distinctions I've attempted so far in this article—the *correct* understanding of what *gender* means; what *sex* means, and what *gender identity* is, in fact.

The Assemblies' paper pointedly asks, "***How should the Assemblies of God respond to the transgender person?***"

I would rather rephrase that to the more personal level, "***How do you as a minister, and both you and I as Christians, respond to an individual who is gender/sex conflicted, resolved to transition, or who has actually transitioned?***" In all three dimensions, our understanding and benevolence are tested.

The position paper further states,

*"The temptation pastors must face down is the reduction of transgender persons to their gender dysphoria and related behaviors, as if the adjective **transgender** exhausted the meaning of the noun **person**."*

Such statements challenge our level of understanding about *gender dysphoria*, and encourage us to know more; but they also challenge our capacity to be hospitable and accepting of the *person*. Both statements appear as a movement forward in making critical distinctions, not judging the person, and recognizing the conditions and situations involved.

Not Just About Dysphoria

The current "gender revolution" isn't just about *gender dysphoria*, however. It's also a series of social moments that collectively instigate an *ideology* about self, body, identity, far removed from customary conventions or factual understandings.

These positions challenge conceptions of gender, role, sex, and identity, for sure. But they also challenge us as Christians to think deeply about how much the Church has institutionalized a dichotomy of the "male and female" that reifies conventions of what these *mean*; and most pointedly, proffers a theology of being tied *only to the body*—that is, the *male* and *female* body.

What of those *born intersex*? People *are* born with ambiguous genitalia, which, at 1% of the population aren't exactly a minority (7.7 Billion is the global population in 2019, meaning that 70+ million people are today, biologically, *intersex*.)

This social moment of gender challenges us, then, as a Church, to consider ***acknowledging intersex individuals, not as aberrations of a norm, but as rightful creations in the image of***

God. We have males, females, and intersex. Intersex as a physical fact of **procreation**¹ (not *creation*) requires a theology of the body that acknowledges the 1% intersex outcomes, and thus goes beyond the conventional male and female alone. Not to do so seems a fundamental disrespect for, and dishonor of the natural variation in the human species. After all, we agree that hair color, height, features, even though not perhaps normatively expressed, ought all be respected, not discriminated against, and accessible to unconditional love.

What of those wanting “just to be themselves”. . . Those that are gender non-conforming but not dysphoric or intersex?

Factions of the social revolution around gender aren't tied to *any* concrete psycho-medical issue, but rather, take energy and form from an **ideology of expressive individualism**: one that dictates *the person*—and no-one else—has the right to self-identify.

A basic problem here isn't individual rights, although these are often enough trampled on; it's the idea that one ought to self-determine outside the boundaries of one's body form (sex) and/or social conventions (gender ideology) *because one has the right and ability to do so*.

And it is here that the Church meets the earlier conundrum stated in the Assemblies of God position paper:

We ought to acknowledge gender dysphoria and ought not judge the individual who, much like eunuchs, “made themselves eunuch for the kingdom” (Matthew 9:12); those who aim for their own body-mind conciliation. We ought not judge the person who chooses gender reassignment, since we aren't to judge another (Matthew 7:15).

How we respond to the movement of self-representation and individuation that seeks to wipe out *all conventions* of biological sex and normative gender identities, is the larger challenge.

Responding to Activism

We must resolve how we are to respond to that segment of the “movement” which *isn't about dysphoria, or intersexuality*; but rather, *about the right to self-define in sex and in gender as a person wishes, “no matter what.”*

Such a position tosses out variables such as anatomy, endocrine functions, genitals, etc., in favor of an individuated self-sculpting (metaphorically, or literally). For the evangelical Christian, it may well raise concerns about how such individuation tosses aside not only “facts,” but most importantly, fundamental elements of self, self-in-community, theologies of ownership (e.g., “you are not your own; you were bought with a price,”), and notions of reciprocity based on responsibility to others.

¹ Adam and Eve were *created* beings. All subsequent human beings are *procreated*, a means of species reproduction that is not ‘perfect’ in outcomes in the same sense as a divine creation. The human genome is subject to procreative variation, as are all forms of life that reproduce *via procreation*. We should, then, stop thinking of Adam and Eve and “us” as “the same,” since we are not. Adam and Eve should be viewed as *progenitors*, not *paradigms* for the human. See Volf, 1996, and DeFranza, 2015, who theologically argue well this point.

Responding to this part of the gender moment suggests clergy especially work doubly hard at engaging an understanding of how persons with such positions feel. There may be many reasons which, if left unexplored, may taint our responses to them.

It has been my experience that the need for self-definition in ways that defy norms is not unusual for many in cultures like our own, which prizes and rewards individuality, often to the extreme. If the person is in the faith, but feels compelled to reinvent themselves to express their “true self” (and that is a rather normative position now in the gender movement: being *agender*, *non-binary*, *fluid*, *unboxed*), clergy ought to help individuals explore such viz. “gospel teachings.” There are in fact stark distinctions to such *expressive individualism*.

And this is where it gets theologically taut.

We have many passages (exegeting normative understandings isn’t as difficult as one would think) that suggest ‘the mind of Christ in us’ compels the Christian to allow Christ to be the center. In essence, our theological understanding claims that in de-centering *our will*, we make Christ the Center. Theologian Miroslav Volf argues this doesn’t mean *obliterating our self*, or *self-conception*; but rather, moving ourselves to a position where we hear the voice of God before we hear our own. **Volf implies a movement to the side:** A recognition that Christ at the center means *I give up the central place in my life to Him*.

How does this theological position stand in the face of expressive individualism?

For one, the Church can’t agree on dissolving the importance of biological sex for both body- and self-identification, since this is the *normative* result of *being* a biological *being*. Ninety-eight percent of the world’s population isn’t changing their minds on their sex, their identity *because of their sex*; or feel “oppressed” because they were “assigned a sex” [it is stated as *gender*] when born. To toss out the biological because it is a sign of “oppression” or *transphobia* amounts to an accusation without cause.

Now, the Church should certainly understand how mixed up all this gets: Activists who want to deconstruct physicality and self-identity, and who feel these are imposed labels are often reacting to the historical wrongs of *gender ideology* which reify beliefs about men and women; which become prejudicial and wrong. **They have a point on that.**

But such ideologies can be changed without the need to deconstruct sex, self and identity; or demand that “if I do,” you must then “*respect my choice*” “*no matter what.*” “*What I believe is what counts.*”

How as a Church do we respond? Especially when the church believes in the Rousseauian essence of social existence: human societies are based on a *social contract*. We believe God made us responsible for and toward each other:

- *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves. (Philippians 2:3)*
- *For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. (Romans 12:3)*

- *“Be careful. . . that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak” (1 Cor 8:9).*

Thus, while the church ought to welcome a liberating trend aimed at not *stereotyping* men or women (or the intersex), it cannot endorse a philosophy of individuation so extreme it seeks to erase **all facts and conventions** of male and female for the sake of self-determination.

Sure, a person can change their appearance and change their self-presentation, but society still demands a certain amount of social conformity for reasons good and common. You still can’t go out on the street “naked as you were born.” We respect individuation in Western cultures, encourage it, so long as it does not tear down others and makes understandable room for each. We also demand a certain degree of that Rousseauian *détente*, to surrender some of one’s will for the sake of the common good.

What “common good” are we talking about when an individual seemingly “can’t express who they really want to be”? Isn’t that “oppression”?

Any response requires we move the argument from politics to social ethics, and from personal venues to interpersonal ones.

Is the actor seeking accuracy or personal advantage? Self-presentation can be packaged to fabricate information that is in the actor’s best interests only. In such, the motive is to benefit the self. However, human beings are rather unique in that we combine a quest for knowledge and “truth,” yet allow for biased interpretations. Social predilections embed us deeply in a matrix of *others*, others who influence our ideas and behaviors just as much as we influence theirs. In doing so, we find ourselves in commitments and compromises—both with the self- private and self- public. **Self-identification is never an alone act, since it carries the repercussions of self- action into the public sphere.** And in doing so, we encounter social prescriptions and proscriptions. These are majority sentiments, ultimately beliefs. Again, we are beholden not just to ourselves as humans, but also to the societies we are a part of, and to each other. That doesn’t sit well with expressive individualism.

“Can’t you be who you want to be?” In our culture, **“Sure you can,”** but with a caveat: You can’t be expected to be cheered on when your self-determination seeks to do away with other’s reality of self, or box them in with new labels, such as *cisgender*, or *hetero-orthodox*, or *transphobic*.

The church ought to respond to the movement of self-representation and identification with care and compassion. It should not use criticism or generate those ‘stumbling blocks’ for others Paul warns Corinthians about. It should listen with patience and not arrogance. It should review any stances which are judgmental, or which reify stereotypes of gender. It should openly confess our historical wrongs against persons of differing opinions.

But it should not surrender the truth of human beings—our *anatomy* (not as destiny but as one of the ingredients necessary *for* identity); our *complementarity* (yes, as men and women, but also *human to human*); and our *social ethic of responsibility to each other* (and with this come some compromises to the self-individuated for the sake of the self-in-society.)

Teach your Congregation Hospitality

There is a need for creating spaces in houses of worship that welcome everyone. More to the point, exercising a spirit of “embrace” doesn’t mean necessarily agreeing with everyone on everything; but it *does mean* that the individuals who we communicate with, visit, “invite into” our congregations feel appreciated, loved, and cared for vs. feeling judged or ignored.

We need a greater dose of compassion. Responding to activism with a loud voice and no acts of mercy and reconciliation only drives a greater wedge of discord. Hospitality, on the other hand, enables. It enables people to listen to you as you listen to them. It provides a segue for the Holy Spirit to do the work we can’t.

Teach your congregation to be welcoming, civil, open. Teach them to disregard forms of self-representation that may be jarring, that may confuse, or make one feel ignorant. No matter. What matters is how we make the individual in our midst feel. Are they feeling welcomed? Do we smile and extend our fellowship to them? If such present some anxiety, are we there to understand and offer comfort? All of these are biblical modes of responding to “our neighbor.”

Pastor, Become an Example

It’s great to talk about all this, isn’t it? Voicing makes us feel we are accomplishing a lot. We think so wrongly. Voicing is only the beginning. **As pastors, you exemplify your words by living them out.** That means, in fact, learning about gender, the elements and issues. It means engaging with gender activism in a way that helps to neutralize the tonality and provides a scaffold for mutual understanding.

Start a conversation with other pastors on this subject. Bring in to small group discussions individuals from the gender movement who not only represent the varied voices, but “embody” them. Learn to hear, and learn to converse in the language of the day. Share your truth and let them share theirs. All of this provides enablement for both, and extends that enablement forward.

There are many ways to ready ourselves to move through the gender revolution. How you as pastor learn to understand, communicate, and provide spaces for those that are part of these new “moments” will assuredly determine how your congregation will respond.

It’s my hope that we all respond with understanding, mercy, and compassion, much like Jesus did to all that came to Him, or when He went to *them*.

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