

Reading 1: What's in a Name? Why Christians Should be Wary of the Word "Transgender"

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Notes

Please write any comments or questions for discussion here.

Cultural debates come packaged with new words and concepts. By creating "constructs" that give names to subjective theories, progressives attempt to crystallize their social theories and give them the appearance of ironclad certainty.

Those who control the language control the terms of the debate. Words create and confirm ideas, and if new words can give meaning to new concepts, over time, these concepts become unquestionable as we grow accustomed to their usage.

Take, for example, the sexual revolution and one of its most infamous legacies, "no-fault divorce." No-fault divorce attempts to facilitate the dissolution of a marriage. But ask yourself, is there really such a thing as a divorce in which all parties are without fault? Of course not. Ask anyone who has ever been through one. No-fault divorce is merely a legal mechanism that makes the dissolution of a marriage more efficient. Yet the way we understand divorce on a cultural level has been transformed by this shift in vocabulary.

How about "safe sex"? Safe sex is sold to adolescents and young adults with the promise that, with the correct accessories, one can enjoy sexual encounters that pose no risk to one's physical health, emotional well-being, or childless state. But as a growing body of testimony shows, an entire generation is getting burned from the excesses of sex divorced from the bonds of marriage. Once again, vocabulary has revolutionized the culture's understanding of sex's purpose.

What Is “Transgender”?

That brings me to the word generating the latest buzz in today’s culture—“transgender.” Transgender means many things in our culture. Mark Yarhouse, a Christian psychologist, offers a clinical definition: “An umbrella term for the many ways in which people might experience and/or present and express (or live out) their gender identities differently from people whose sense of gender identity is congruent with their biological sex.”

This is a helpful definition because it captures the range of psychological experiences of people who perceive themselves as transgender without requiring an acceptance of the contested ideological underpinnings of the transgender movement. In a fallen world, where Christians profess that things have gone awry, individuals are beset with psychological disorders and mental illnesses that distort their perception of reality. The sensation that a person feels himself to be female, despite having male anatomy, fits neatly into this category. So, in this way, Christians recognize that these confused psychological experiences are simply another consequence of the Fall.

Unfortunately, to most, the semantics of transgenderism do much more than simply describe someone’s subjective psychological experiences. To secular progressives, the existence of those who claim a transgender identity incinerates the biological foundations of personhood and links psychological perception with one’s ontological personhood instead. How so? Because the culture has elevated the concept of “transgender” to the level of personal identity. Personal testimony supersedes our embodiment. Apparently, the majority of those in our culture now subscribes to the idea that transitioning from one sex to another sex is something actually possible, despite this being physically, and metaphysically, impossible.

Political correctness demands that no stigma be attached to conflicts over gender identity. Where gender dysphoria was once considered an ailment associated with Gender Identity Disorder—a pathology—activists have politicized medicine to make what was once a pathology into an identity, a worldview, and a political virtue. So the label “transgender” not only denotes the positive affirmation of a mental illness, it communicates a metaphysical fiction seeking acceptance and adoption throughout all channels of the culture.

The reason why people can insist they are “trapped in the wrong body” is that, in the transgender paradigm, psychology dictates ontology. Because our self-perception is taken to determine reality, individuals and activists can insist on utter absurdities, such as the claim that men can menstruate, with sober sincerity. It is why Time magazine is attempting to make ordinary Americans accept the idea that men can give birth. The transgender movement requires accepting the idea that men who identify as women are actually women; and that women who identify as men are actually men.

Consider the phenomenon of celebrating the “birthdays” of transgender individuals—not on the date of their natural birth but rather the date on which the person chose to publicly disclose his or her new transgender identity. By implication, the person belonging to his or her former gender is no longer living. This pseudo-resurrection, presupposing a body-self dualism, is a gnostic myth. In other words, it is a false gospel. In what may be the ultimate demonstration of expressive individualism, the secular age of anti-reason demands that we believe that we can raze our bodies and construct alternate and idealized identities at will.

Christian Identity and Transgender Ideology

The Christian worldview cannot countenance a movement that plays haphazardly with biological sex and the promise of self-resurrection. The picture seen in the first two chapters of Genesis is one where divinely orchestrated binaries are fixed, intentional goods: Heaven and Earth, Night and Day, Land and Sea, Male and Female. The Christian worldview can, however, countenance a world like that of the third chapter of Genesis—a world in which people have broken perceptions of themselves brought on by the Fall.

The Christian worldview accepts the validity of people’s testimony that gender dysphoria is a real experience resulting in heartrending distress. The Christian worldview cannot, however, countenance the idea that men can become women or that women can become men. No amount of self-assertion or self-description, no matter the vehement sincerity, can result in individuals reconfiguring their chromosomes. Seen from this view, to exist as “transgender” is, itself, a social construct offered up by revisionists.

This is why simplistic or unwitting uses of the term “transgender” are problematic. The culture has intentions for the word that are incompatible with Christian anthropology. The culture wants individuals to accept, without a hint of hesitation, the idea that surgically altering one’s body can make a person a member of a different biological sex. Transgender may describe the range of experiences that people encounter, but for those in control of the word throughout dominant culture, “transgender” bespeaks a much weightier construct that Christians should be wary of casually adopting. “Transgender” is a neologism chock full of ideological assumptions that Christians cannot innocently use.

For the same reasons, Christians should not accept the validity of the word “cisgender.” In common usage, “cisgender” means that a person’s biological sex and his or her gender identity are in alignment. Prior to the concept of transgender, the term “cisgender” did not exist. It was merely the state of affairs that was normal given a person’s biological sex.

This is how a world that accepts transgenderism implicates everyone else: to accept that some individuals are truly a different gender than their biological bodies means that everyone that’s not becomes cisgender. But individuals whose gender identity and biological sex align are not cisgender; they are simply well-functioning humans—people who accept that the nature of their existence is determined by God’s design for human beings.

We should refrain from using words like “transgender” and “cisgender” as much as possible, because careless use signals our implicit acceptance of ideas that violate not only the Bible’s portrait for human dignity but also the laws of rationality and principles of sound metaphysics. Although I’ve written a book titled *God and the Transgender Debate*, which uses the term, I still believe that Christians should exercise caution about casually using words that validate fallen, irrational constructs.

To be clear: individuals are not transgender. Individuals cannot be transgender. People are born male and female, with fallen desires, intuitions, and perceptions that lead the heart and mind astray.

Undoubtedly, expressing skepticism about accepting the validity of a person's transgender identity will lead to accusations of "erasure"—another neologism in the transgender community that accuses those who refuse to accept transgenderism as causing harm by invalidating a person's existence as his or her chosen gender. But are Christians who reject the notion that individuals can become a member of the opposite sex truly harming others? Far from it. Christians who resist the culture's pressure to bow before its demands are standing for truth. This may be a truth of divine revelation that our neighbors might not agree with, but the truths of our maleness and femaleness are also natural truths that each of us bear witness to consciously or unconsciously. Rather than erasing them, the Christian gospel offers all people the ability to understand who they truly are, what their greatest need is, and what eternal reward they can enjoy long after the shifting sands of secular progressivism are behind them.

Christians have a better identity to offer the world. There are not "transgender" persons. There are persons who experience gender dysphoria—persons who are, nonetheless, made in the image and likeness of the God who loves them, persons for whom Christ came to die so that they may live. There is no better identity to which we can subscribe than this. God's image-bearers are all broken, but we are also imbued with inviolable dignity. Human beings are creations with a God-designed nature—not science projects to be reimagined at will.