

Why Is Satan Attacking Gender?

I love walking on the beaches of Sanibel Island. There, I've seen stunning sunrises and magnificent sunsets. I've even seen the famed "green flash" twice at sunset.

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One morning during sunrise, I began singing in the Spirit as I walked alone on the beach. A white egret walked behind me for almost a mile as if joining me while I worshipped. I detect the hand of God in the beautiful seashells and wildlife on Sanibel as it renews my soul. In the same way, I see God's hand in His creation of humankind, and I believe a biblical understanding of that creation can transform our understanding of gender and sexuality.

Paul indicates in Romans 1:20 that we witness God's invisible qualities, divine nature and power through His creation. The world around us reveals His handiwork. However, the world does not bear His *image*. God reflects His image in the pinnacle of creation, humankind. God reserves His image for us alone to bear, as male and female, as men and women.

As the former director of a bone transplantation bank, I could see God's marvelous handiwork in our bodies. But as living, breathing temples, we are created to express His image through our lives.

In Genesis Chapter 1, each creature was created "according to its own kind." However, God expressly set humankind apart to reflect Him. We are not simply like "our own kind" but share

in the manifest image of God Himself. We are not a random collection of atoms and molecules but of God's divine design.

Bearing God's Image

Our bodies are sacred, formed by the hand of God out of the dust. Genesis 1 reveals humankind's role as one of dominion and bearing of God's image, which separates us from all creation. We alone bear the likeness of God. I am astonished and marvel at the idea of this spiritual reality.

We specifically bear God's image through our gender, being male and female, as expressed in our relationships. God created the blueprint and said that it was good. There is an intentional design to our gender and sexuality.

Biblical principles provide parameters to honor and protect them. Sexual union is reserved for the marriage bed, between one man and one woman. In Ephesians 5:32, Paul calls this union "a great mystery." Why? Because the oneness of the marital bed foreshadows our future oneness with Jesus. It is our spiritual destiny aligned with our divine design.

Satan despises everything associated with the divine and creation. He especially hates God's image, so his hatred targets our capacity to bear that image.

Spiritual warfare focuses on undermining gender, specifically addressing how we bear God's image as male and female. Distorting who we are as men and women, dividing us relationally, destabilizes our role as image bearers. Is it any wonder our culture is rife with broken sexuality and fragmented gender identity? The battlefield surrounds us.

In the 21st century, Satan kindled the return of unrestrained Gnosticism. Gnostics believe the body and matter are inferior or bad. This heretical belief, prevalent in our culture, fails to see the sacred design of our bodies. We surgically alter, delete or attach whatever we like because bodies are

disposable. Gnostic thinking creates an egocentric, heightened self-awareness. I seek self-gratification, making personal happiness essential, no matter the cost.

Detached from the body, our personhood (humanity's quality or condition) and identity now focus on feelings and attractions. Lacking God's presence, I give my emotions the supreme authority to define me. This can allow for gender dysphoria, in which the expression of personhood and identity no longer aligns with an individual's physical body. Biological gender is irrelevant, and the whole of that individual's personhood is reduced to a "sexual identity," a term I despise.

But we are so much more than our sexuality. Gender has become a chaotic confusion of dozens of ever-increasing categories.

Understanding the Pain

Those with conflicted sexual identities face numerous battles:

The battle within when they realize their feelings are not the same as most. Imagine the shame and questioning.

The battle of deciding whom to tell about these feelings. Imagine the fear.

The battle of rejection from family and friends. Imagine the dread.

The ongoing battle of discovering who they are with these feelings. Imagine the stress.

What about Christians, young or old, who struggle with these issues? They face significant spiritual warfare. Imagine the fear of condemnation.

Due to shame, a friend from my past feared that if he walked on the steps of a church, he would taint them. He would not walk into a church and later died of AIDS.

One of my favorite stories in the Gospels is of the woman, likely a prostitute, recorded in Luke 7. This unnamed woman seeks Jesus while He is having dinner in the house of Simon, a Pharisee.

What were her thoughts before she entered the house? Was she battling the fear of stepping into the home of one who would have stoned her? Did she combat shame, debating her worthiness to approach Jesus? Or was she hopeful, clinging to her faith that He would forgive her? What extraordinary courage and fortitude she displayed not only to enter Simon's house but also to wash the feet of Jesus with her hair!

What would be your first thoughts if a transgender individual approached you or walked into your church? Understanding and empathy must be our first response when the sexually broken cross our path. If we want to be the image bearers of Jesus, we must see with His eyes. We do not look first for sin but for a person who has likely had a life of turmoil, battles and pain. You may want to judge or feel disdainful, but ask for the Lord's presence to center you.

Being Safe and Approachable

How do we engage and connect with our gender-fragmented culture, a culture with rampant individualism? In our post-modern world, truth is relative and subjective. Biblical truths regarding sexuality are dismissed as archaic. Sexual identity, now based on feelings or attractions, often evades reason. For example, a 52-year-old man can identify as a 6-year-old girl. Disagreement regarding sexual identity is considered hate speech. How do we speak into our culture?

Relationally connecting through storytelling speaks to the younger generations, so the first way to engage with others is to express a willingness to hear their story.

We must ask God to search our hearts for the presence of pride, arrogance or legalistic zeal. Do I see those struggling

with gender or sexual issues as being below me? Is speaking my message more significant than engaging relationally with the broken person before me? Do I fail to see their humanity?

We all seek to know and be known, our deepest God-given desire. At our core, we search for identity. Those struggling with sexual and gender brokenness long to be seen, heard, understood and to find relational connection (community).

Is this not what we all desire? We all have the same ache to know and be known. However, as Christians, we search for fulfillment not as the world does but by finding our wholeness and completion in Christ.

Matthew 7:3 (ESV) asks, "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" Do we look for a gay speck? A trans speck? The world takes Matthew 7:1-5 out of context, insisting that Christians are not to judge. However, as Christians, we must walk with discernment, judging good from evil, light from darkness and right from wrong.

We need divine objectivity, seeing our lives and others through God's eyes. Jesus died for every person we will ever meet. Men and women deserve to be treated with dignity. No matter how broken an individual may be, they remain created in God's image.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *Life Together*, writes that Christians have forgotten the ministry of listening. Part of treating others with dignity is the willingness to hear their story. When I listen to another, I show that I care and respect them. I allow space, not stepping in with spiritual Band-Aids. Bonhoeffer writes, "We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God."

Empathy, a significant part of listening, seeks to understand another's emotional journey by hearing their experience. Their story is valid simply because it's their story. We can never

assume that we know exactly how another may feel. I may not have walked in their shoes, but I can mourn, grieve or rejoice with them. I listen for how I can come alongside to assist with their burdens. Empathy does not mean having all the answers; it is simply being humanly present with another human being.

Carrying the Message

If you had asked me if I was happy during the final years when I lived as a gay-identified man, I would have said yes. Despite being insecure and broken inside, I had to keep convincing myself I was OK. To maintain my choice, I had to keep up the facade. Although it looked as though I had it all together, I did not. The insular company I kept left me stuck in my illusion and brokenness. Therein lies the challenge.

I needed—along with those with gender dysphoria or who are transgender—to understand the foundational truth of identity in Christ. But this spiritual reality is foreign to a non-Christian. I cannot appeal to who they are in Christ, yet I can express the spiritual reality that God sees them as objects of His love. When Jesus took on a human body, He took on flesh, something different from who He was as Spirit. He can understand their struggle and condition. Jesus died for them, offering Himself as a ransom. Did any of us understand the true extent of our sin when we first invited Jesus into our hearts? I'm still learning that reality.

It took time for the truth about my new identity to sink in. It was formed in conversations, studying the Word and my quiet times. Like the prodigal son, I was broken before the Lord and ready to receive this truth.

For the sexually broken, talking about a new identity can be unsettling. They've fought long and hard to get where they are, thinking they have found their true selves. Hearing that this identity is false can sound frightening or threatening.

We need to listen, offering encouragement as they take the next steps.

As church leaders, we need to realize the sexually broken are in our congregations. Often, they are trying to fit in, not drawing attention to themselves. We must address the topic of sin from our pulpits in a way that reveals God's holiness and righteousness without it being what I call "*sloppy agape*" (God is love, so everything is fine with Him). We must teach sin and repentance with truth and compassion.

The sexually broken need to hear that God welcomes them right where they are. They don't have to be cleaned up or perfect before God can manifest His presence. But He also wants them to walk in integrity, becoming the men and women He designed and created them to be.

Listen for the words the sexually broken use to define themselves. Do they have faulty self-beliefs or misrepresentations of God's character? Instead of correcting them, engage their hearts and story to learn how they developed those conclusions.

Remember, storytelling is crucial. When appropriate, talk about how God revealed His love for you. What was it like? Did it challenge you? Did you resist it? Can you relate aspects of their story to yours?

If you sense defensiveness, gently ask about it. Resist taking things personally but inquire how you perhaps triggered their reaction. Trust God to provide whatever you need.

These broken men and women seeking Jesus have often left their previous communities or relationships and may be wrestling with loneliness. They need ways to connect and feel safe. It's not easy, and hurt happens. Community is messy! Gender dysphoria or transgenderism and unwanted same-sex attractions do not appear overnight. These struggles are complex and difficult. Recovery is also a challenging walk that does not

happen overnight.

All of us are in the process of becoming the men and women God has created us to be. I believe we each battle a personal Goliath. Let us extend the same grace and mercy to others that God extended to us and believe that with Him, nothing is impossible.

Reverend Bob Ragan *has offered support to the sexually and relationally broken in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area for 35 years and has ministered on five continents. His book Path Through the Wilderness is helpful for individual study or small-group curriculum. Bob is an ordained congregational care deacon at The Falls Church Anglican in Northern Virginia.*