

Can the Church Embrace the Transgender Community?

When I posed “A Sincere Question for Those Who Identify as Transgender” last week, I was hoping to get some candid and constructive responses, and I was not disappointed. My sincere thanks to all who took the time to respond thoughtfully, especially those who identify as transgender.

On one website where the article was posted there were well over 1,000 comments in the first few days, while a gay journalist took the time to respond with an article of his own. Again, I really appreciate the interaction, and it does not fall on deaf ears.

There were, of course, those who responded with anger and insult, but I understand these are very sensitive issues and, in their eyes, I am contributing to the pain and suffering of transgender men and women.

Others decided to play God and determine what my real motivations were, refusing to believe that I could be sincere in posting my question. That is quite unfortunate, especially for those who claim to be followers of Jesus and who love to say, “Don’t judge!”

And I’m always amused by the steady stream of criticism I receive from people who say to me, “You have no right to comment on this issue, because your doctorate is in Semitic languages, not psychology or any related field.”

Of course, the people criticizing me and claiming to speak as authorities do not hold doctorates in these fields either, and when it comes to biblical and Semitic studies, where I can speak with academic authority, they respond, “Why should I listen to a bigot like you?”

Thankfully, as I stated at the outset, there were many constructive and detailed comments, and I read many of them carefully, archiving them for future reference, checking the websites that were linked, and, in keeping with my habit for years, asking the Lord to reveal any blind spots I have when it comes to the question of transgender identity (and I will continue to do this).

Here are some of the main points raised by the readers (please forgive me if your main point is not listed here): 1. While there is not a definitive single test to determine if someone is transgender (again, we are not talking about those who are intersex or who have chromosomal abnormalities), there are rigorous psychological tests that help identify if someone has gender dysphoria; 2. while we do not know for sure the causes of gender dysphoria, "There is little doubt that the causes of transgenderism are biological,/neurological/genetic in nature, though the precise mechanism is unknown at this time" (quoting Melissa); 3. the vast majority of those who transition are glad they did and for the first time in their lives feel whole; 4. while the current way of treating gender dysphoria is far from perfect (hormones, sex-change surgery, etc.), by rejecting this method, we reject the one proven way to save transgender lives; 5. if we do not receive them based on their perceived identity (which would mean embracing Caitlyn rather than Bruce Jenner), then we are transphobic; 6. the church needs to realize that this is not an issue of sexual sin but rather of people dealing with a deep internal struggle, one that drives many to suicide.

Have I understood some of the main points that were made? If so, how should we respond to these difficult, complex and deeply personal issues? And what can we share with our transgender friends to help share our perspective constructively?

In making the following points, I'm not trying to win an argument or prove that I'm "right." I'm simply seeking to

communicate for the sake of clarity and dialogue.

First, as followers of Jesus, we need to do whatever we can to meet trans people where they are, not branding them vile sinners or sexual perverts because they chose to have sex-change surgery or because they feel peace when they dress in clothes opposite to their biological sex. To immediately view them the way we view a drug dealer or a violent gang member or a pimp would be to do them a great disservice.

If they are hurting people trying to find wholeness, then the church should be the best place for them, and if we have a difficult time affirming their perceived identity, at least we can build a loving relationship, one that listens as well as speaks as we explore the meaning of true wholeness together.

Second, we should recognize that there is still a healthy scientific debate about the causes of gender dysphoria, and just like we heard about the alleged “gay gene” some years ago, only to have that theory debunked, the debate about gender dysphoria continues. And dare I say that many Christian psychologists and therapists question the philosophy, worldview and presuppositions of many of their secular colleagues? In other words, perhaps the “science” is not always as scientific as it claims to be? (This book, written by two lifelong, liberal APA members, is an eye-opener, and it is secular in its approach.)

Third, it is still not clear to me how a psychological test can distinguish between someone with a deep mental or emotional disorder and someone who has some type of physical disorder of the brain. If we agree that catering to a mental or emotional disorder (rather than trying to cure it) is not the most compassionate thing to do, then how can we be sure that someone identifying as transgender does not, in fact, have a mental or emotional disorder?

Fourth, our transgender friends must realize that, although

the majority of them do not identify as homosexual—some of them have reminded me of that this week—they form an integral part of the LGBT acronym, meaning that their cause is not perceived as a separate one. Instead, they are perceived to be part of the same movement that wants to redefine marriage (something we must not and cannot do if we are to honor God), part of the same movement that tries to rewrite or reinterpret the Bible (as sacrilegious an act as there is), and part of the same movement that is assaulting our freedoms of speech, religion and conscience.

More specifically, while we want to do everything we can to embrace transgender individuals, we cannot embrace transgender activism, including: the idea that people are “assigned” a gender at birth; the idea that gender can be separated from biology and genetics; the idea that the “gender binary” (meaning male-female distinctives) is destructive; the idea that the very real struggles of a tiny minority must be imposed on the rest of society (including such things as gender-neutral bathrooms and locker rooms, even in our children’s schools); and the idea that gender identity can be fluid, and so we should embrace a trans individual in whatever fashion they feel to present themselves at a given moment. Is there no place where we can say, “I’m sorry, but I can’t call you James today and Janet tomorrow and then James the day after that”?

Fifth, I say once again that there must be a better way to help trans strugglers than hormones and sex-change surgery. Obviously, people are free to do what they feel is best, and there is no law against this, while parents need to be incredibly sensitive and delicate when responding to a trans-identifying child. And clearly, it is not my place to tell an individual what to do, unless they came for counseling. But just as we realize that chemotherapy is a far from perfect treatment for cancer, which is one of the reasons we continue to look for a cure to cancer (even as people get chemo), so

also we should agree that the current “best solution” is sadly lacking, which means we must continue to pray and research and look for a better way.

Of course, my trans friends (and enemies) will say to me, “You just don’t get it. It’s either this method or suicide, and if you really care, you should stand with us as we make these difficult choices.”

Again, you are free to make whatever choices you make. That’s between you and God. But I remember talking with a male-to-female transgender who had been married for 37 years before transitioning. And this individual, who now went by the name Lisa, identified as a committed Christian who was now closer to the Lord than ever before.

I asked, “What happened to your marriage?”

The reply: “... my wife has ... paid a monumental price and our marriage of 37 years has come to an end. ... I have disqualified myself from being the one who is privileged to be one flesh with her or to be her companion in life, and in that regard she is like a widow.”

I responded, “But the Lord calls you as the husband to lay down your life for your wife, to put her first. How could you do this?”

The reply (paraphrased, in short): “It was either this or suicide.”

So, God’s solution was to destroy a marriage and render a faithful wife a widow?

I am not minimizing the decades-long, agonizing struggle of this individual, and I am not denying their claim that they are closer to God than ever. That is for the Lord to decide.

I’m simply reiterating that there must be a better way, and therefore we should not stop pursuing that better way. That’s

what real love will do, whether you call it transphobic or not, and that's why I'm not celebrating the latest transition story.

All this being said, I put these points forward to further our dialogue, not to drive anyone away, and if you consider yourself a child of God, then please pray about these things (as I trust you have many times before; I will do the same) and let the interaction continue. May God grant us more light than heat.

Michael Brown is the host of the nationally syndicated talk radio show "The Line of Fire" and is the president of FIRE School of Ministry. His newest book (September 2015) is *Outlasting the Gay Revolution: Where Homosexual Activism Is Really Going and How to Turn the Tide*. Connect with him on Facebook at AskDrBrown or on Twitter @drmichaellbrown