
THE BIBLE AND THE **TRANSGENDER** EXPERIENCE

How Scripture Supports Gender Variance



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Discussion Guide

NOTES TO GROUP LEADER

This book lends itself very well to a four- to five-week Bible study or book discussion group, requiring that participants read about twenty to twenty-five pages per week. If using a four-week format, I recommend asking group members to commit to reading the introduction and chapters 1–3 before the first gathering, so they will come ready to discuss. Cover chapters 4–6 during your second session. Chapter 7 can be the focus of your third gathering. End by discussing chapters 8–10 during your final session. If using a five-week format, I recommend the intro and chapters 1–2 for the first session, chapters 3–4 for the second session, chapters 5–6 for the third, chapter 7 for the fourth, and chapters 8–10 for the final session.

Depending on your group's demographics and interests, you may want to delegate some "Topics for Exploration" at the end of each session. Topics may arise out of that particular session, and I have also offered suggestions. Individuals can then be invited to briefly share what they learned with the group at the beginning of each session and/or to share more about their topic as it is discussed during your time together.

It could be helpful to open discussion of the book's first chapters with a consideration of the four continuums relating to biological gender, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation represented in the "Genderbread Person" diagram found at <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/01/the-genderbread-person>. This is

Discussion Guide

a link to the original version, which the creator has since updated more than once. You can access all versions from this link and decide from there which version would be most helpful to print off and discuss with your particular group.

I know I have given you more here than you can probably use in each session, so feel free to pick and choose those discussion questions that will work best for your group. May your discussions be deep and life-giving!

CHAPTER 1—WHAT WE ARE AND ARE NOT TALKING ABOUT: LGB AND TQI

Discussion Questions

1. Prior to reading this chapter, were you familiar with the distinctions between L, G, B, and T, Q, and I?
2. As a group, brainstorm the names of people you've heard or read about in the media who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and intersex. Can you think of at least one person in each category? If not, why might you not have heard about this type of individual?

CHAPTER 2—CULTURAL CONTEXT: NOW AND THEN

Discussion Questions

1. Have any of you seen some of the TV programs featuring fictional transgender (transsexual) characters—such as *Glee*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *Trans-Parent*, *Sense8*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*—or reality shows featuring trans individuals—*Becoming Us*, *I Am Cait*, *I Am Jazz*, and two seasons of *America's Next Top Model*? Discuss your impressions of these characters and/or individuals.
2. Do you remember a time or incident in your childhood when you first became aware of your gender? What did you think and feel about gender at that point?

3. Have you ever had an experience of knowing yourself to be different from who others thought you were or wanted you to be? (Maybe your parents or significant other wanted you to choose one career, but you wanted to pursue another. Perhaps your church held to a certain belief, but you believed differently.) Talk about your own experience of not fitting in to cultural expectations.
4. Why do you think trans people are willing to risk losing their family, friends, faith communities, jobs, and places to live in order to transition and live according to their internal gender identity?

Have you ever lost any of these things: a friend, your job, housing, your parent's approval, church membership, etc.? What sort of impact did that have on your life?

What might trans people experience (physically, emotionally, financially, spiritually) as a result of facing all or some of these losses?

5. Transgender (transsexual) people feel their gender identity does not match the gender they were assigned at birth, so most desire to live full-time as the gender with which they identify (in so far as it is possible for them). Cross-dressers *are* comfortable with the gender they were assigned at birth, but they also have a *need* to spend some time dressed and presenting as the opposite sex. Discuss whether it's easier for you to understand/get/relate to the experiences of transsexuals or cross-dressers.
6. Discuss any questions or comments group members have about others under the transgender umbrella: persons who are inter-sex, genderqueer, bigender, two-spirit, etc.

Topics for exploration in preparation for discussion in the second session:

- Find out what's required in your state to change the gender marker on your driver's license.

Discussion Guide

- Find out the cost of “top surgery” (breast augmentation or reduction) or “bottom surgery” (genital reconstruction—collectively these surgeries are known as “gender confirmation surgery”) for both trans men and trans women.
- Learn more about transgender persons on the National Center for Transgender Equality’s website at “Understanding Transgender People FAQ,” www.transequality.org/issues/resources/understanding-transgender-people-faq.
- Learn more about transgender people on the American Psychological Association’s (APA) website at “Answers to Your Questions About Transgender People, Gender Identity and Gender Expression,” www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/transgender.aspx.
- On the APA website, also learn more about the impact of the societal challenges transgender people face in the article “Transgender Today” at www.apa.org/monitor/2013/04/transgender.aspx.

CHAPTER 3—VERSES ABOUT EUNUCHS: DEUTERONOMY 23:1, ISAIAH 56:1–7, ACTS 8:26–39

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the differences and similarities between eunuchs in the Bible and gender variant people today.
2. Are you personally familiar with stories of Middle Eastern-looking people in the United States being harassed after 9/11 or as a result of the rise of ISIS today? Do you yourself have any friends or relatives who are immigrants or the children or grandchildren of immigrants who are being encouraged by family members to “marry their own kind”?
3. Do you agree or disagree with the author’s suggestions that the “ancient Israelites may have been hearing God’s word to them through the lens of their own fears, so they wrote that it was

God's will that they exclude others . . . a perspective God later corrected through Isaiah, Jesus, and the Acts of the Holy Spirit"? If you disagree, share your theory as to why we see this movement from exclusion to inclusion in the Bible.

4. The author writes: "The fact that the Bible itself shows a historical movement and shift in the Israelites' understanding of how God would have them relate to the gender variant people of their day suggests that God may also have an accepting, affirming, and inclusive attitude towards the gender variant people of our day." Given the differences and similarities that exist between the eunuchs of biblical times and gender variant people today, in what ways do you think the biblical movement towards inclusion of eunuchs should or should not inform the church's modern-day relationship with gender variant people?

CHAPTER 4—LEVITICUS 21 AND HOLINESS

Discussion Questions

1. The author writes: "The reason the church no longer uses this passage as part of its requirements for ordination is because the New Testament reveals that, through Christ, the requirements of the Old Testament law have been fulfilled (see Acts 15, Galatians 3, Hebrews 8–10). Consequently, Christians no longer observe all the requirements of Old Testament law." Discuss examples of other Old Testament laws that Christians no longer follow.
2. Discuss other stories from the Gospels that demonstrate Jesus' teaching that it is not the things that people come in contact with on the outside that makes them unclean, impure, or unholy, but the thoughts and actions that arise from inside them.
3. Discuss and/or research where your denomination stands on the ordination of transgender people and why it takes that stance.

Discussion Guide

Topics for exploration in preparation for discussing chapters 5–6

- Learn more about cross-dressers at www.tri-ess.org.
- Learn more about intersex persons on the American Psychological Association’s website at “Answers to Your Questions About Individuals With Intersex Conditions,” www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/intersex.aspx.

CHAPTER 5—DEUTERONOMY 22:5: CROSS-DRESSING TO EXPRESS ONE’S TRUTH OR TO DO HARM?

Discussion Questions

1. In the beginning of this chapter the author suggests three guidelines for arriving at a responsible understanding of a Bible passage: (1) understanding the meaning of each of the words in their original languages, (2) understanding the passage within its historical/cultural context, and (3) understanding the passage within the context of the whole Bible.

What guidelines do you use for interpreting scripture, especially verses that may seem contradictory to other scriptural teachings and/or to modern-day scientific findings or beliefs (for example, the modern belief that stoning people to death and killing adulterers, as directed in Deut. 22:21–22, is not a good idea)?
2. At the end of the section “Interpretations Based on the Meanings of Words and Immediate Context,” the author offers four different ways that commentators have interpreted Deuteronomy 22:5 based on word meanings and context. Discuss the pros and cons of each of these interpretations. Which interpretation seems most reasonable to you and why?
3. The author indicates that even if Deuteronomy 22:5 were a prohibition against cross-dressing as we know it today we should no longer be concerned about it since Jesus came to fulfill the Old Testament law, so Christians are no longer bound by it, and

since we do not follow any of the other laws found in that same chapter. Can you think of any reasons that people might offer for why such a prohibition *should* still be observed today? Which reasons are most compelling to you?

4. Based on what you have read in this chapter, do you think Deuteronomy 22:5 is addressing cross-dressing as it is practiced today, or do you think it is a prohibition against the ancient Israelites using the clothes of the opposite gender to disguise their true selves for deceptive purposes and/or for cultic practices?
5. Discuss your thoughts and feelings about the author's statement: "Since gender variant people today are cross-dressing in order to express their true selves, in order to *not* deceive others and so harm relationships, I believe this verse is actually an affirmation to gender variant people to dress in the clothing that best expresses their true gender identity."

CHAPTER 6—MATTHEW 19:11–12 AND WHAT JESUS HAD TO SAY ABOUT GENDER VARIANCE

Discussion Questions

1. The author suggests three things that Jesus might have meant when he said that some people are born eunuchs: that they are gay, transgender, or intersex. Discuss what you think Jesus meant by this.
2. Brainstorm some of the ways in which Jesus might have known that there were eunuchs who were born that way.
3. The author writes: "The fact that Jesus included the one thing the Gospels report him saying about gender variance in the very same conversation in which he quotes the verse about God creating humans male and female (Gen. 1:27) indicates that Jesus was well aware that there were more than just two ways to live out one's gender—that male and female were not the only two realities." Do you agree that Jesus' inclusion of what he said

Discussion Guide

- about eunuchs in this discussion indicates his belief that there are more than two ways to live out one's gender? Discuss.
4. Do you think that Christians should respond to the gender variant people of today with the same acceptance and lack of condemnation that Jesus exhibited regarding eunuchs, the gender variant people of his day? Why or why not?
 5. Discuss some of the suggestions from Appendix A for creating a trans friendly congregation or fellowship group. Which would be the easiest to carry out in your context? Which would be the most challenging?

Topics for exploration in preparation for discussing chapter 7

- Bring in definitions and common examples of “merism” and examples of merism in the Bible.
- Google one of the most well-documented trans children in the United States, Jazz Jennings. You'll find lots out there about her. You might want to start with this video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jbg-LdVdNk0.
- Watch this YouTube video of a young transgender couple that aired on ABC's 20/20: www.youtube.com/watch?v=SNCJ6Vf7qOM.
- Research transgender people across cultures worldwide. Do a general search on this topic and also specifically look up the Hijra of India, the Fa'afafine of Samo, the Katoey of Thailand, the Muxe of Mexico, the Mahu of Hawaii, and Native American Two-Spirits.

CHAPTER 7—GENESIS 1:27 AND THE ARGUMENT FROM CREATION

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think about the author's perspective that Genesis 1 is a poetic account of the creation story and not a scientific explanation of how things came to be?

2. One definition of a merism is a figure of speech in which two contrasting things are used to indicate something in its entirety. A common example is the expression “I looked *high and low* for it,” indicating that you looked everywhere. A merism might also use several parts of something to indicate the whole of it. An example of this usage is the phrase “lock, stock, and barrel,” which uses several significant parts of a gun to indicate the totality of it or something else. In Psalm 139:1–3 the writer uses several merisms to indicate God’s complete and total knowledge of the psalmist (*italics added for emphasis*).

You have searched me, LORD,
and you know me.
You know *when I sit and when I rise*;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern *my going out and my lying down*;
you are familiar with all my ways.

Do you think the writer of Genesis 1 might be using “night and day,” “land and dry seas,” “plants and animals,” “male and female” as merisms, as figures of speech in which two contrasting things are used to express the entirety of something?

3. The author argues that the existence of intersex people indicates that God does create more than just male and female. Do you think this is a valid argument? Why or why not?
4. Discuss whether you think gender variance occurs as a result of “the Fall” or as a result of God’s good and diverse creation.

Imagine living your whole life in a culture that says that some aspect of your being that you did not choose and that you cannot change (perhaps your eye color or your height) is evidence of the Fall. Imagine that this immutable aspect of yourself is seen as a disability, as less than the best God intends. Discuss how this

Discussion Guide

might make you feel about that aspect of yourself and/or about yourself in general.

5. The author suggests that our culture, in general, does *not* operate under the assumption that our bodies are somehow more indicative of who we are than does our personality/mind/spirit/soul. Can you think of examples, beyond the ones the author gives, that support or challenge this perspective?
6. Why do you think our society is accepting of a genetic woman who gets breast implants but often disapproving of a trans woman who does the same? Why is our culture more approving of a genetic man who wants to get a hair transplant to alleviate balding than it is of a trans man who wants to get a “masculine” haircut?
7. The 2011 study the author cites indicating that the attempted suicide rate for transgender people is 41 percent also showed that the national average suicide rate was 1.6 percent. What might the great disparity in these numbers indicate about the transgender experience? Discuss how God might see these numbers and what God might want us to do in response to them.
8. The author argues that the testimony of two-, three-, and four-year-old trans children, and of transgender adults who likewise sensed there was something different about their gender from similar early ages, is evidence that our internal sense of ourselves is a stronger and more valid determinant of our gender than are our genitals. We all know that it is not “good form” to define a word by using that word in its definition. Is relying on the testimony of trans children, youth, and adults to define what determines gender a bit like using that word in its definition when you’re trying to define it? Should their testimony be considered in deciding what should determine gender? Why or why not?

9. Discuss the stories of the parents who had transgender children. Do you think there are other things they should have tried or done? What would you do if you had a three-year-old who was telling you that they were not the sex that matched their genitals? Did reading these stories about transgender children have a different impact on you than reading or hearing the stories of transgender adults?
10. The author gives numerous biblical examples of times when God has called God's people to embrace a new belief. Might it be as challenging for Christians to accept that gender variant people are a part of God's good creation as it was for the early Christians to accept that God no longer required them to keep kosher (Acts 10–11:18)? Discuss.
11. Were you aware that there are eleven different countries that offer an option other than male or female on their citizens' passports? What impact might allowing for a third gender option on American passports have on U.S. culture? If Jesus were a member of the U.S. Congress and this issue was to come before the House or Senate, WWJD? (What would Jesus do?)

Topics for exploration in preparation for discussing chapters 8–10

- Research transgender people throughout history.
- Learn about the proper way to address gender variant individuals at www.glaad.org/reference/transgender.
- Read one of the leading U.S. pediatrician's answers to questions about trans children and youth at www.chla.org/blog/physicians-and-clinicians/transgender-community-questions-answers-johanna-olson-md-%E2%80%93-chla%E2%80%99s.
- Watch that same pediatrician answer questions about trans children and youth in brief video clips at www.kidsinthehouse.com/expert/parenting-advice-from-johanna-olson-md.

Discussion Guide

- Read, listen to, or watch the sermon “The Princess Dress and the Name of Jesus” at www.friends-ucc.org/index.php/new-sermon-page/sermon/98-the-princess-dress-and-the-name-of-jesus.

CHAPTER 8—MATTHEW 16:13–27 AND THE NOTION OF “CHOICE”

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss Dr. Johanna Olson’s perspective that gender identity is an immutable characteristic, a part of your core being and not a choice. Do you feel like your gender identity was a part of your core being or did you choose it?
2. Throughout this book the author has stressed the importance of looking at the biblical, historical, and cultural context of a passage in order to interpret it responsibly. Do you think this is an important criterion for understanding the Bible? What other criteria do you use to understand the Scriptures?
3. Prior to reading this chapter, had you usually interpreted Matthew 16:24, “deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me” to mean that you should sacrifice your own needs and heart’s desires for God and for others? If not, how had you interpreted it?
4. What do you think of the author’s interpretation that Matthew 16:24 “is not a passage about how we are to relate to others. This is Jesus’ teaching about how we are to relate to our selves—to our false self, the self that has been indoctrinated with the values of this world, and our true self, our soul self—the self that is made in the image of God”?
5. Do you think it’s appropriate for the author to compare what Rosa Parks did by refusing to move to the back of the bus, and what the author’s college roommate did by choosing a career as a teacher instead of a doctor, with the choice a transgender person or a gay person makes to come out?

6. The author gave numerous examples of what it looked like in the lives of various people when they more fully embraced who God had created them to be. Are there any aspects of your divinely created truth that you feel God might be calling you to embrace more fully? How do you think your choice to live your life more authentically might be received by others?

CHAPTER 9—GENDER VARIANT INDIVIDUALS IN THE BIBLE

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss experiences each of you have had of hearing a very familiar Bible story in a fresh, new way.
2. Discuss the possibility that Jacob may have been gender variant, based on the biblical description of him as one who was content to stay at home among the tents, and that he cooked and was his mother's favorite. Given the rivalry between his wives, Rebecca and Leah, about having children, and the importance of child-bearing in the culture of the ancient Israelites, what might the fact that Jacob sired the twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel say about his possible gender variance?
3. Brainstorm possible reasons for why Jacob might have given his son Joseph a "princess dress," a *ketonet passim*.
4. The author suggests that understanding Joseph as a gender non-conforming person answers many questions regarding Joseph's story, such as why his father gave him a girl's garment, why Joseph would wear a girl's garment, why his brothers hated him enough to sell him into slavery and tell his father he was dead, and why not even one of those same brothers would recognize him some twenty years later. Do you agree with this perspective, or do you think there are other equally plausible explanations for these aspects of Joseph's story? Discuss.

Discussion Guide

5. The author writes that the reason she had never stopped to consider the radically gender variant nature of Deborah's role as a judge in Israel was because in the past she had read scripture through a cis-normative lens, that is, from a perspective that assumes the norm to be that all persons are either strictly male or female. Discuss whether you have also been reading Bible stories through a cis-normative lens and if this chapter has had any impact on that perspective.

CHAPTER 10—JOHN 9 AND THE GIFTS GENDER VARIANT PEOPLE BRING TO THE WORLD

Discussion Questions

1. The author shares how significant this story from John 9, of Jesus healing the man born blind, was for a group of transgender parishioners. Can you think of other Bible stories that might particularly resonate with gender variant individuals?
2. Discuss the gifts that gender variant people you know—either personally or through the media—bring to the body of Christ and to the world.