
THE BIBLE AND THE **TRANSGENDER** EXPERIENCE

How Scripture Supports Gender Variance



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CONTENTS

PREFACE	7
PART ONE LAYING THE GROUNDWORK	
1. <i>What We Are and Are Not Talking About: LGB and TQI</i>	10
2. <i>Cultural Context: Now and Then</i>	12
PART TWO EXPLICIT VERSES AND ARGUMENTS	
3. <i>Verses about Eunuchs: Deuteronomy 23:1, Isaiah 56:1–7, Acts 8:26–39</i>	20
4. <i>Leviticus 21 and Holiness</i>	28
5. <i>Deuteronomy 22:5: Cross-dressing to Express One’s Truth or to Do Harm?</i> ...	33
6. <i>Matthew 19:11–12 and What Jesus Had to Say about Gender Variance</i>	44
PART THREE IMPLICIT VERSES AND ARGUMENTS	
7. <i>Genesis 1:27 and the Argument from Creation</i>	50
8. <i>Matthew 16:13–27 and the Notion of “Choice”</i>	72
PART FOUR HOPE AND AFFIRMATION	
9. <i>Gender Variant Individuals in the Bible</i>	82
10. <i>John 9 and the Gifts Gender Variant People Bring to the World</i>	95
APPENDIX A: HOW TO MAKE YOUR CONGREGATION OR GROUP TRANS FRIENDLY	101
APPENDIX B: DISCUSSION GUIDE	106
ENDNOTES	121

P R E F A C E

In 2012 my life’s journey brought me—a straight, nontransgender, middle-aged, middle-class minister—onto the staff of what was then a predominantly LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex) congregation. It turns out I was an answer to the pastor’s prayer that straight folks would start coming to the church so they could be more inclusive—which they now are!

It also turned out that this church was very inclusive of the transgender community. On any given Sunday, approximately 10 percent of our worshipping congregation fell somewhere under the transgender umbrella. We had trans men and trans women, cross-dressers, and those who identified as two-spirit and genderqueer. I quickly realized I needed to augment the seminary education I had received back in the 1980s to effectively minister to all my new congregants!

Consequently, I began listening to the stories of my transgender parishioners and attending conferences and support groups for gender variant individuals, that is, for those persons for whom the traditional categories “male” and “female” did not adequately define who they knew themselves to be. (I will define all these terms in chapters 1 and 2.) I read and studied and basically availed myself of any and every possible resource that would help me learn more about those who identified as gender variant. However, when I looked for books on what the Bible has to say about the transgender experience, I found very few. Consequently, I decided to write this book, based on what I have learned during these past four years.



part one

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

I

WHAT WE ARE AND ARE NOT TALKING ABOUT

LGB and TQI

I am a minister who identifies as straight and nontransgender. Four years ago I joined the staff of a church where most of our congregants identified as gay, lesbian, or transgender. As a result, I began encountering the acronym “LGBTQI” with some frequency. I learned that “LGBTQI” is an abbreviation for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and intersex.” I also learned that lumping all these letters together sometimes leads to the misunderstanding that being L, G, or B is the same as being T, Q, or I. However, this is not the case. There are some very important distinctions between these terms. (If these terms are new to you, as some of them were to me, know that I will explain them in greater detail in the next chapter.)

The words “gay,” “lesbian,” and “bisexual” refer to one’s *sexual orientation*. Sexual orientation, generally speaking, has to do with whom one is attracted to romantically. The word “transgender,” broadly speaking, refers to one’s *gender identity and/or one’s gender expression*. Gender identity has to do with a person’s internal sense of themselves, whether they know themselves to be a woman, a man, or possibly both or neither. Gender expression has to do with how people out-

wardly express their gender through dress, mannerisms, hairstyles, vocal inflections, and so on.

My transgender congregants helped me understand that being transgender has nothing to do with one's sexual orientation, that gender identity and sexual orientation are two totally different things. They explained it this way: Being gay is about who you go to bed *with*; being transgender is about who you go to bed *as*. Consequently, transgender individuals can be gay or straight or bisexual or any of the various sexual orientations that human beings experience.

Regarding the “Q” and the “I” in “LGBTQI,” persons identifying as queer or “questioning” could be referring to their sexual orientation, their gender identity, their gender expression, and/or all three. The word “intersex” refers to one's *biology*. People who are intersex are born with genitals, internal reproductive organs, or chromosome patterns that do not fit typical definitions of male or female.¹

Many helpful books have been written about what the Bible has to say about homosexuality, that is, about the LGB, so that is not what we will look at here. In this book, we will consider what scripture has to say about the TQI—about gender and biological variance. So let's begin!

2

CULTURAL CONTEXT

Now and Then

When I was earning my Master of Divinity degree at Asbury Theological Seminary, our professors taught us that, when it comes to understanding the Bible, “context is everything!” This meant that we were never to try to understand scripture by simply looking at an isolated verse.

I once heard a joke that illustrates this point. A person was feeling discouraged and uncertain about their future direction. They decided to look in the Bible to find guidance for their life. The Good Book fell open to Matthew 27:5, “He [Judas] went out and hanged himself.” Not finding that to be very encouraging, the person decided to try again. So they put their finger down on another random page and read, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37). Surprised, they tried a third time, opening to “What you are about to do, do quickly” (John 13:27). Truly, context *is* everything!

The *cultural* context of the transgender experience in America today is very different from that of biblical times. It is also important to understand that the modern context of the trans experience, which includes the very words used to describe that experience, is highly fluid, continually shifting and changing. I am about to offer some basic definitions and descriptions. However, if you are reading this book much past 2017, you may want to check a website like that of the

National Center for Transgender Equality (www.transequality.org) for more up-to-date definitions and information. Likewise, not everyone currently agrees on the definitions and usage of these terms, and usage may vary from country to country. Keeping these disclaimers in mind, let's first try to arrive at an understanding of the cultural context of gender variance in the United States today. Then we will consider the biblical context.

TRANSGENDER—AN UMBRELLA TERM AND A SPECIFIC TERM

Today the word “transgender” is commonly used as an umbrella term that includes many categories of gender variant individuals. Chances are you have seen media coverage of trans celebrities like Caitlyn Jenner, Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, Chaz Bono, and Jazz Jennings. Or perhaps you have watched television shows featuring trans characters, programs like *Glee*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *Trans-Parent*, *Sense8*, and *The Bold and the Beautiful*, or reality shows featuring trans individuals such as *Becoming Us*, *I Am Cait*, *I Am Jazz*, and several seasons of *America's Next Top Model*. If so, you are familiar with one category of trans persons, namely, those who used to be called transsexual but are now usually just described collectively as transgender or simply “trans.” (Note: The word “transgender” is an adjective, not a noun, so you would not refer to transgender persons as “transgenders.”) Individually, trans people may be referred to as a “trans woman” or a “trans man,” or as MTF (male to female) or FTM (female to male). These are persons whose gender identity does not match the gender they were assigned at birth.¹

Most transgender individuals desire to live “full time” as the gender they identify as, so they dress and style their hair and present themselves accordingly, as much as they feel they can. (Lack of financial resources, state laws, or fear of losing friends, family members, church membership, and careers keep some trans people from living full time in what they know to be their true gender identity or making all the changes they might like to make.) Most transgender adults and some

trans teens take, or wish to take, steps to medically alter their biology. According to these individuals' personal preferences and available resources, such steps could include taking hormones, electrolysis, and/or surgical operations. (A word about proper etiquette: Because a transgender person's gender identity is about who they know themselves to be internally, it is *never* appropriate to ask about their external anatomy or what surgeries they have had.)

I was surprised to learn that taking testosterone will drop a trans man's voice and allow him to grow facial hair. However, taking estrogen does not raise the pitch of a trans woman's voice, and, while it slightly retards facial hair growth, it does not stop it. Because of the impact of hormones on voices and hair growth, trans men are more likely to "pass" than are trans women. In fact, the first time I had a conversation with a trans man, I never even realized that the deep-voiced man with a full beard with whom I was speaking was transgender . . . until he made a reference to that fact about ten minutes into our conversation!

Trans men and trans women usually seek to change their name and the gender marker on their legal documents such as driver licenses and passports, although states have different laws governing this process. Those who are coming out as adults often find themselves in marriage and family counseling and possibly in the process of divorcing. Some marriages survive the revelation that one spouse is transgender; others do not. Teens and young adults who come out as transgender may be cut off from parental support. If they do not receive parental support, these young people often end up homeless and on the streets. Trans people who are members of faith communities often fear rejection from these communities and struggle with what it means to relate to their Higher Power as a trans person. Some ultimately leave their faith traditions while others develop an even deeper and more meaningful spiritual life. Many trans individuals struggle with employment issues, often finding themselves unemployed, underemployed, or dealing with harassment in the workplace if they are employed.²

The years-long process during which transgender individuals are making various social, legal, and medical changes is referred to as “transitioning.” I have had the honor of becoming good friends with a trans woman in transition. When I first met Gabrielle, she had only been out for two years and had just recently made the decision to live full time as the woman she knew herself to be. During the last four years I have stood in line with her at the DMV to get a new license, nursed her through surgery, cheered when the judge pronounced her legal name change, cried with her when she struggled with family issues, and celebrated when she was honored as Atlanta’s Best Trans Activist for 2015. Most importantly, I have supported Gabrielle in her journey of coming to understand that God loves her just as she is and has a wonderful purpose for her life.

CROSS-DRESSERS

I have also had the honor of attending a monthly meeting for another group of people under the transgender umbrella, a support group meeting of a chapter of Tri-Ess. Tri-Ess is an international educational, social, and support group for cross-dressers and their significant others.³ While there are individuals who cross-dress as a fetish, that is not what members of Tri-Ess do. From these individuals and their significant others I have learned that, unlike trans men and trans women, cross-dressers *do* identify primarily with the gender they were assigned at birth, but they also need to express, experience, and spend some hours living as their “opposite” gender. What this means for these individuals is that they are comfortable living in the gender they were assigned at birth and have no desire to alter their bodies with hormones or surgeries. But now and then—and the amount of time varies from individual to individual—each of them has, not just a *desire*, but a real *need* to dress and act and be treated as a member of the opposite sex. Typically they do not cross-dress in their workplace, but many feel a need to share their identity as a cross-dresser with their family members. This often creates relational challenges, but those challenges are usually worked through

and family relationships typically remain intact because cross-dressing is an occasional, not a full-time, gender expression.

Because cross-dressers rarely feel a need to share their gender expression with people other than family members, most people never know that they know cross-dressers . . . unless the cross-dresser happens to be someone's spouse or parent. Consequently, as of this writing, our culture as a whole is more aware of transgender children, teens, and adults than we are of cross-dressers.

One common misconception is that drag queens and drag kings are cross-dressers. This is usually not the case. While it is true that drag queens and kings are persons who cross-dress, they typically do it for the purpose of entertainment. Cross-dressers, on the other hand, are persons who present in the clothing of the opposite sex in order to experience their feminine or masculine essence. If cross-dressers are at a club, they are usually trying to pass, to blend in; they are typically *not* the ones up on stage!

INTERSEX PERSONS

Today in the United States there are a variety of other people who are also included under the transgender/gender variant umbrella. Intersex persons, sometimes referred to as persons with differences of sex development (DSD), are individuals born with internal and/or external sex organs and/or chromosome patterns that are different from typical males and females. Like the word "transgender," "intersex" is also an umbrella term including several dozen different types of physical conditions that are currently classified as intersex.⁴ While intersex is sometimes included under the transgender umbrella, it should be noted that most intersex persons feel their gender identity *does* match the gender they were assigned at birth, thus, most intersex people *do not* identify as transgender when the term is used in its particular sense.⁵ Nonetheless, because their physical beings do not match culture's expectations of typical males and females, intersex persons do experience a marginalization similar to that experienced by gender variant

people. As Georgiann Davis, intersex person, professor, sociologist, and author of *Contesting Intersex: The Dubious Diagnosis*, wrote in a blog:

I do feel that society's discriminatory view of intersex is something all intersex people struggle with on a day-to-day basis. Because of narrow understandings of sex, gender, and even sexuality, intersex kids do face marginalization and ostracization from their peers, teachers, and in some cases, even their families.⁶

Thus, while most intersex persons do not identify as transgender, *per se*, their societal experience has many similarities to that of gender variant individuals. (See chapters 6 and 7 for further discussion of the intersex experience.)

OTHER GENDER VARIANT PERSONS

Genderqueer persons identify as neither entirely male nor entirely female, whereas bigender persons identify strongly with both genders and see themselves as both male *and* female. Calling on their own traditions, some Native Americans use the term “two-spirit” for gay, lesbian, bisexual, *and* transgender persons in their cultures.⁷ Likewise, there are many other terms and people under the transgender umbrella, as evidenced by the fact that in 2014 Facebook introduced fifty different terms for individuals to use to categorize their gender identity and expressions on their personal pages!⁸

GENDER VARIANCE IN THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT: EUNUCHS

Needless to say, our modern cultural context is very different from the biblical context. If you are familiar with scripture, you know that nowhere in the Bible do we find the words “transgender,” “cross-dresser,” “intersex,” “genderqueer,” “bigender,” or “two-spirit.” Historically speaking, these are modern terms, which do not show up in our two-thousand-plus-year-old Bible. However, that does not mean there are not gender variant folks in the Bible!

In biblical times, the main group of gender variant people were eunuchs. These were men who had either been born eunuchs (Matt. 19:11–12) or who had been castrated for various reasons, often as the result of military conquest. Eunuchs were sometimes advisors and high-ranking officials in royal courts. Often they served as protectors and overseers of royal women since they were now considered “safe” to be around women because they had been surgically altered. Lacking the ability to procreate relegated eunuchs to the category of gender variant and caused them to be looked down upon in ancient Jewish culture.⁹

To understand why eunuchs were not highly esteemed back then, we need to know that in the early days of Israel’s history the Jews were just a small tribe. Since they were constantly in danger of being overrun by neighboring peoples, producing children to maintain and build up the tribe was a highly valued cultural trait. Because eunuchs could not fulfill this critical gender expectation, they were definitely viewed as different, as gender variant.

So while the Bible does not specifically say anything about the categories of gender variant people that we know about in today’s culture, we can look at what it says about the gender variant people of its day, the eunuchs, and see what we can learn that might be relevant in today’s context.