Pastoral
Paper

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WHAT PRONOUNS SHOULD CHRISTIANS USE FOR TRANSGENDER PEOPLE?

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Introduction

As Christians, what pronouns should we use when we speak about transgender people? Do we listen to how our transgender friends and colleagues identify themselves as "he," "she," "they," or even a recently minted pronoun like "ze," and then adjust our language accordingly? Or is there a biblical mandate, a divinely dictated relationship between sex and gender and pronoun use, that supersedes individuals' self-identification?

I'll argue in this paper that the most biblical response to transgender people's pronouns is a posture of unequivocal *pronoun hospitality*. That is, I believe that all Christians can and should use pronouns that reflect the expressed gender identities of transgender people, regardless of our views about gender identity ethics. If a person identifies herself to you as "she," I hope you will consider it an act of Christ-like love to call her "she" out of respect, whether or not you believe that the way she expresses her gender identity is honoring to God.

This idea of pronoun hospitality will probably already feel obvious to Christians who are fully affirming of transgender identities—that is, Christians who believe that followers of Jesus may ethically identify with and express a gender other than the one commonly aligned with their sex assigned at birth. (I use the phrase "sex assigned at birth" in this paragraph because it is the phrase commonly used by those who hold this theological position.) After all, if we fully agree with the biblical ethics of a transgender person's self-identification as "he," "she," "them," or "ze," the only remaining impediment to shifting our pronouns accordingly is sheer laziness.

For other Christians, however, the question of pronoun use has another layer of complexity. What if we believe, in accordance with the stance of the *Center for Faith, Sexuality & Gender,* that "God desires all males and females to express their gender in accordance with their biological sex"? (I use the phrases "biological sex" and "birth sex" in this paragraph because they are the phrases commonly used by those who hold this theological position.) Some proponents of this view of gender ethics still agree that Christians should show respect to transgender people by using the pronouns with which they identify themselves. Others have argued that because God intended gender and biological sex to be inextricable, Christians can only speak truthfully if they use pronouns which match a person's birth sex. Thus, we cannot in good conscience use pronouns that match the self-understanding of transgender people, because doing so would be lying.

The goal of this paper is not to weigh in one way or another on the Christian ethics of gender identity.[1] My intention is to set aside questions of gender identity ethics in order to focus exclusively on language ethics. What does it look like for people who think differently about gender identity ethics to speak truthfully and effectively about one another? This paper considers the common reasons given by Christian conservatives for rejecting the idea of pronoun hospitality, then challenges two assumptions about the nature of language that such arguments make and lays out an affirmative case for pronoun hospitality based in a robust understanding of how language works.

Before we continue, let me make a few comments about this paper's language choices. First, because I'm intentionally setting aside questions about gender identity ethics, I want to avoid language that indicates an obvious prejudice for one side or the other of this debate. Phrases like "biological sex" or "birth sex" are commonly used in circles with more traditional views of sex and gender, as well as by many medical professionals, to describe the physiological characteristics of bodies at birth as they relate to categories of sex. However, most transgender people and allies prefer the phrase "sex assigned at birth," not least because it recognizes that some intersex people undergo medical interventions at birth in order to make them appear recognizable (and therefore "assign" them) as male or female. For the first group, the phrase "sex assigned at birth" is problematic because it attributes to human beings an assignation they believe was performed by God. For the second group, "biological sex" and "birth sex" can be problematic because they assume a simple one-to-one correspondence between biological realities and birth designation as "male" or "female" that does not always exist.

In an attempt to avoid favoring one side by adopting their terminology, I'll use the neutral phrase "appointed sex" for the remainder of this paper. Those with traditional views of gender ethics may view the "appointment" of sex as coming from God within the womb, while those who affirm non-normative gender identities may emphasize the human element of the "appointment" of sex at birth (or in an ultrasound). I hope this language can help readers from both perspectives recognize the same phenomenon as we seek to find common ground on the question of pronoun use.

Second, I'm using the term "transgender" here as an umbrella term to include a variety of non-cisgender[2] identities: genderqueer, genderfluid, gender-nonbinary, and gender-noncomforming folks, as well as transgender men and women.[3] I'm also including within my scope those intersex people whose appointed sex does not ultimately align with their gender identity, although not all intersex people experience such a misalignment. In short, this paper sets out to address any category of gender identity for which pronoun accommodation has sometimes been refused on ethical grounds.

In addition to not addressing gender ethics per se, I'm also intentionally excluding a number of peripherally related concerns from this paper. For example, this is not a political analysis of the nature and boundaries of free speech. I'm not debating whether people can or should be legally or institutionally compelled to accommodate transgender pronouns. I'm also not writing directly about the use of chosen names (such as a transgender woman's identification with a culturally feminine name instead of with her masculine birth name), even though this issue is closely related to pronoun use. In my experience, anyone who is willing to use a transgender person's pronouns is also willing to use their chosen names. Moreover, a number of Christian theologians who have objected to using pronouns still make allowances for using chosen names. John Piper, Denny Burk, and Andrew T. Walker, all of whom counsel Christians not to accommodate the pronoun identification of transgender people, still argue that using chosen names is permissible. As Walker writes, "Names are not intrinsically gendered. Names are gendered culturally…. I've known boys and girls named Kelly and Cameron. My own wife's name [Christian], in fact, is the only time I've heard hers

applied to a female."[4] My hope is that, if you accept the idea of pronoun hospitality, it will be easy enough to extend that principle to chosen names as well.

One last caveat: As a celibate gay Christian myself, I'm very conscious of the problems that can arise when well-meaning straight people set out to speak on behalf of gay people instead of creating room for us to speak for ourselves. The last thing I want to do, then, is turn around and claim as a cisgender person to speak on behalf of transgender people. In hopes of avoiding this error, I've conducted a handful of interviews with transgender Christian friends reflecting on the meaning of pronoun use. Though these friends hold a variety of theological perspectives about gender identity ethics, they all affirm (as you will read in the following pages) the wisdom of Christians using the pronouns with which transgender people identify themselves. I hope that, in offering a linguistic defense of this view, I am honoring these friends and countless others like them.

The Case Against Pronoun Accommodation

Christian arguments against pronoun accommodation—that is, using the pronouns with which trans people identify—are generally rooted in the importance of truth-telling. According to this view of language, the purpose of a pronoun is to make a statement about a person's appointed sex. Thus, whether someone's internal perception of their gender identity differs from their appointed sex has no bearing on which pronouns can be truthfully applied to that person. When pronouns are defined this way, the imperative to always tell the truth means there is no context in which a person whose appointed sex is male should be called "she," or a person appointed female be called "he." (These arguments are less often made concerning people who identify with pronouns like "they/them/their" and "ze/zim/zir," but they apply similarly.)

One notable proponent of this view is Denny Burk, president of the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW). For Burk, conservative Christians have an obligation to make their objections to transgender identity evident in their language: "I must never encourage or accommodate transgender fictions with my words. In fact, I have an obligation to expose them. For me, that means that I may never refer to a biological male with pronouns that encourage him to think of himself as a female. Likewise, I may never refer to a biological female with pronouns that encourage her to think of herself as a male. In other words, I have to speak truthfully. And that includes the choice of pronouns that I use."[5]

Under Burk's leadership, the CBMW released a statement on gender and sexuality called the Nashville Statement, which garnered a number of notable signatories in the Christian evangelical world. Article 11 of the Nashville Statement contains an implicit rejection of pronoun accommodation: "We affirm our duty to speak the truth in love at all times, including when we speak to or about one another as male or female. We deny any obligation to speak in such ways that dishonor God's design of his image-bearers as male and female."[6] One of the notable signatories of the statement, John Piper, puts the same case quite plainly indeed: "I would be lying to call a he a 'she.'"[7]

Andrew T. Walker, author of the 2017 book *God and the Transgender Debate* and another signatory of the Nashville Statement, offers a more nuanced view of the case against pronoun accommodation. Walker acknowledges that "Christians disagree—hopefully charitably—about pronoun usage."[8] He also recognizes that using transgender people's own pronouns may be seen as "a way to extend courtesy in hopes of developing a relationship in which biblical truth can eventually be shared."[9] In his book, Walker advises avoiding pronouns altogether when possible and even proposes that in certain contexts, accommodation to pronouns may be made: "My own position is that if a transgender person comes to your church, it is fine to refer to them by their preferred pronoun."[10]

In an article written after the release of his book, however, Walker argues more plainly that the use of pronouns which match a person's experienced gender identity rather than their appointed sex is untruthful: "Though it is politically incorrect to do so, I will not refer to someone with their desired pronoun in a public venue such as a talk. Those with writing or speaking platforms have an obligation to speak and write truthfully and not kowtow to political correctness or excuse falsehood."[11] Even though he recognizes the relational benefits that can and do come as a result of accommodating transgender people's pronouns, Walker maintains that the Christian commitment to speaking truthfully supersedes this relational good.

Whereas Burk's and Piper's arguments both emphasize the importance of truthfulness for the sake of *personal integrity* before God, Walker's position focuses primarily on how his *truthfulness will impact others* who are listening to his words. He might accommodate pronouns in a private setting at his church for the sake of avoiding offense, but in public settings where his words can be heard broadly, it seems important not to speak in a way that might imply what he considers a false vision of reality. Thus, Walker suggests that it is not *inherently* wrong to use a transgender person's pronouns, as far as personal integrity is concerned. For Walker, pronoun accommodation ought to be avoided only because and to the degree that it communicates false information to others.

Burk shares Walker's concern for how his pronoun use will be interpreted by others. Yet Burk argues that refusing pronoun accommodation is *always* a better communicative choice for others, as well as a move that allows for greater personal integrity. "We do our neighbors and loved ones no favors," writes Burk, "by speaking in ways that conceal the truth of God."[12] By the same token, theologian Robert Gagnon argues that pronoun accommodation signals "complicity" with a loosening of Christian gender ethics and that such complicity "benefits no one, least of all the offender."[13]

As we've just seen, while Christian arguments against pronoun accommodation generally focus on the importance of truth-telling, the primary purpose and benefit of this truth-telling is not always the same. Truth-telling may be valued primarily for the sake of personal integrity before God, primarily for the messages it communicates to others, or a combination of the two. Whereas Burk, Piper, and Gagnon all seem to suggest that pronoun accommodation is always and categorically wrong, Walker's emphasis on interpersonal communication suggests that pronoun accommodation is wrong only in certain contexts. But all four arguments are united in two fundamental assumptions they make about the nature of language—assumptions I will seek to challenge in the next section.

Rethinking the Nature of Language

The arguments against pronoun accommodation summarized above all rely on two important assumptions about the nature of language. These assumptions are all the more powerful because they remain unstated:

- Assumption #1: Pronoun gender always and only refers to an individual's appointed sex.

- Assumption #2: When our definitions of words differ from other people's definitions, "telling the truth" means using our own definitions.

Let's look at each of these assumptions in turn.

Assumption #1: Pronoun gender always and only refers to an individual's appointed sex.

Though some people, especially those with more traditional views of gender identity, now use the word "gender" as a functional synonym of "sex," the word didn't start out this way. Instead, "gender" came from an Anglo-Norman and Middle French word meaning "kind" or "sort"—the root of our modern word "genre." In its earliest recorded uses in English, "gender" was a grammatical term for separating categories of nouns and pronouns in inflected languages like Greek and Latin.[14] These types of words were called "masculine," "feminine," and "neuter," but this didn't mean that gender inherently communicated information about sex or even about what we now call "gender identity." In fact, although the male and female sexes were usually spoken of in masculine and feminine

genders respectively, this rule of thumb had a number of prominent exceptions.[15] Masculine, feminine, and neuter pronouns were chosen primarily for grammatical purposes rather than to convey information about sex or gender identity.

Consider a biblical example of this principle: In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is referred to with both neuter and masculine pronouns. Because the Greek word for "spirit," *pneuma*, is a neuter noun, the pronouns that agree with it grammatically are neuter pronouns (like our English "it"). It's perfectly normal, then, to see the Holy Spirit referred to with Greek neuter pronouns in the Bible, even if the English translations of these passages usually revert to masculine or non-neuter personal pronouns.[16] However, when the Holy Spirit is named with the Greek masculine noun *parakletos*, "comforter," in the epistle of John, the pronouns referring back to this Holy Spirit must be masculine.[17] These changes in the gender of the Holy Spirit's pronouns are presumably not statements about the Holy Spirit's sex or gender identity. They are fundamentally grammatical in nature.

Grammatical gender, including pronoun gender, clearly meant something different to the Greek-speaking New Testament writers than it does to us in present-day English. A similar case can be made about the Hebrew-speaking Old Testament writers—who, interestingly enough, used the feminine noun *ruach* to name the Holy Spirit.[18] In the present day, grammatical gender unrelated to sex or gender identity is still a central grammatical feature of Romance languages like French and

Spanish, where even words like the definite article "the" have grammatical gender as male or female.[19]

Given the flexibility of what grammatical gender can communicate, there's nothing inherent in the meaning of pronoun gender for all times in all languages. Our responsibility as careful language users today is to ask what pronoun gender communicates in our own linguistic context. Does it refer always and only to an individual's appointed sex? Or can it in fact refer to something else instead?

For many English speakers today, there remains a significant difference between the terms "sex" and "gender." While "sex" corresponds at least to some degree with an externally perceptible state of being,[20] "gender" describes a person's internal sense of self-identification as male or female. Simply (and a bit crassly) put, the statement "I have a penis and testicles" is a statement about sex, whereas the statement "I want to be a man after God's own heart" is a statement about gender. It is quite possible for a Christian to believe that gender identity *should be* expressed in accordance with appointed sex while also recognizing that not every person's gender identity *is* expressed in accordance with their appointed sex.

Most major English language publications in the West now treat pronoun gender as a tool for indicating a person's *gender identity* rather than a person's *appointed sex*. That is, in the context of contemporary journalism, the word "he" gives information about a person's self-perception as male, not necessarily about that person's appointed sex. As the editors of *Christianity Today* write in an editorial note, "Following general journalistic practice, we at CT follow a simple rule: Use the pronoun that the person uses."[21] We don't need to believe that this definition of pronoun gender is

ideal in order to recognize that it is indeed a prevalent meaning of pronoun gender today.

That pronouns have come to function in this way doesn't mean they have "lost" their meaning. According to today's journalistic practice, pronouns still have a very important meaning and function: they communicate to readers the gendered self-understanding—the gender identity—of the person being referred to. A journalistic use of "she" tells us that a person understands herself as "she," regardless of her appointed sex. This is the inverse of the approach that used to dominate journalistic practice, in which "she" communicated a person's appointed sex regardless of gender identity. The shift in dominant usage causes pronouns to work differently than they used to. Pronouns' meaning isn't "lost"; it has been exchanged for a subtly different meaning. Linguistic shifts like this one, occurring in response to shifts in cultural usage, have always been part of the evolution of language. After all, what we consider "correct language" in the present day has in many cases been considered incorrect by grammarians of previous centuries. Changing trends in usage are continually forcing us to rewrite our dictionaries and grammar books.[22]

Does this mean that everyone who uses gendered pronouns in 21st-century America is speaking exclusively of gender identity and not of appointed sex? Of course not. For one thing, because gender identity and appointed sex align in a normative way for cisgender people, it's easy for speakers to conflate these two ideas in their speech. In addition, as we saw in the previous section, there are people who believe that gendered pronouns can only refer to appointed sex and should never match gender identity if that identity diverges from the normative expression of appointed sex. As is so often the case with language, there are at least two different meanings (if not many more) by which today's

gendered pronouns in English can be defined.

What we're dealing with in the pronoun debate, then, is differing understandings of what pronouns are supposed to mean. This brings us to our second tacit assumption about language:

Assumption #2: When our definitions of words differ from other people's definitions, "telling the truth" means using our own definitions.

Let's consider two related thought experiments:

First, imagine that you're trying to persuade your three-year-old daughter her to eat her broccoli at dinner. "If you eat your broccoli," you tell the child, "you can have as many cookies as you want afterwards." She, being a great lover of cookies, dutifully consumes the broccoli. As a reward, you sit her down at your computer, open up a web browser, and say, "Here, all the web 'cookies'[23] in the world are at your fingertips." Your daughter, unaware of the internet meaning of the word "cookies," accuses you of lying, because you have deprived her of promised sugary goodness. You, because of your more expansive vocabulary, maintain that you have told the truth: "I said you could have all the cookies you wanted. I never said what kind of cookies."

Now suppose that you (an American) are chatting with a British man who has kindly baked you a dozen small, crisp cookies. "When my mother calls you," he asks, "will you tell her that my biscuits were delicious?" You refuse, not because the cookies he gave you weren't delicious, but because they weren't "biscuits." He explains that the word "biscuit" in Britain means the thing you Americans would call a small, crisp "cookie," whereas your idea of a "biscuit" is something more like a British "scone." You continue to refuse his request as a

matter of principle. Because of what the words "biscuit" and "cookie" mean to you, you believe you have just consumed a dozen cookies, and to call them anything else would be a lie. When his mother calls you, you tell her, "Your son never baked me any biscuits."

The point of these trivial (but delectable) examples is to show how meaning is shaped by context to determine what words are true. If the truth of language were determined exclusively by a person's own understanding of what words mean, then the statements "you can have as many cookies as you want" and "your son never baked me any biscuits" would both be perfectly truthful. However, both of these statements cause their hearers to believe a thing that is untrue. They might be true in an abstract sense, but they communicate falsely when placed in context.

As ethical communicators, we have a responsibility to be aware of who we are communicating with. In order to convey true information to others, we need to consider our listeners' definitions of words as well as our own. If we speak words that seem truthful to us while ignoring how other people will hear and understand our words, we're not really *communicating*. We're just talking to ourselves, for our own benefit. This isn't linguistic integrity. It's linguistic narcissism.

What does this principle mean in the context of the pronoun debate? As we just saw, gendered pronouns aren't always used to communicate information about appointed sex in contemporary English. Instead, pronouns are now regularly used to communicate information about a person's internal sense of gender identity, regardless of whether that gender identity is normatively paired with their appointed sex. Christians desiring to speak wisely and truthfully within this linguistic

terrain cannot simply translate their ethical beliefs about gender identity into a single definition of pronouns' meaning and then assume that the whole world operates under that same definition. Instead, speaking truthfully in this context means that we consider how our use of pronouns will be interpreted by the people who hear them. If we use pronouns that accurately convey the messages we want to communicate, then we have spoken truthfully and ethically before both God and our neighbors.

If this view of language is correct, the pronoun debate hinges not on our own preferred definitions of words but on our best attempts to choose language that conveys the things we mean to convey to others. What does it communicate to our listeners when Christians use or refuse to use the pronouns with which transgender people identify? In other words, which pronouns help Christians best speak the truth of the gospel? We'll address these questions in the next section.

A Defense of Pronoun Hospitality

In Acts 17, the apostle Paul delivers a remarkable sermon to the people of Athens, drawing from the religious language already at play in the Athenian world to make an argument about the nature of God: "As I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you" (v. 23).[24] Paul goes on to argue for God's proximity to human beings by quoting from two Greek poets: "God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'" (v. 27-28).

In order to contextualize his gospel message, Paul makes a fascinating linguistic move here, and one that (fittingly enough) hinges on the pronoun "he." Both of the poems Paul quotes from—the first is Epimenides' *Cretica*, the second Aratus' *Phaenomena*—use the word "he" to refer to the Greek god Zeus. Paul uses these same lines to make claims about the one true God, drawing parallels between Yahweh and Zeus through a pronoun that ambiguously names them both. It seems that Paul isn't overly fixated on determining the single "true" meaning of this pronoun and insisting that he can only speak truthfully using this definition. Instead, Paul shifts his language to accommodate the language of his hearers, meeting them where they are. His possible fear that he might be misunderstood as praising the Greek conception of Zeus is superseded by his delight at the opportunity to communicate truthfully about the nature of God.

Paul's willingness to adapt his words in order to be best understood by his audience is a linguistic reflection of the missional principle he lays out in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23:

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

When we apply Paul's linguistic approach to the pronouns we use about transgender people, I believe we arrive at a posture of *pronoun hospitality*: a willingness to accommodate the pronouns of our transgender neighbors regardless of our own views about the Christian ethics of gender identity. That is, when we order our language toward making sure that the truth of the gospel can be heard in an understandable way by those around us, we are compelled to use

pronouns in a way that effectively communicates our respect for transgender people, even if we still believe that followers of Jesus are called to express their gender identity in accordance with their appointed sex.

This is the stance taken by Christian psychologist Mark Yarhouse, who has done extensive research at the intersections of faith and LGBTQ+ identities. Yarhouse writes, "It is an act of respect, even if we disagree, to let the person determine what they want to be called. If we can't grant them that, it's going to be next to impossible to establish any sort of relationship with them."[25] For Yarhouse, pronoun gender communicates respect or disrespect for persons rather than agreement or disagreement with gender identity expression. Thus, pronoun hospitality is an invitation into deeper relationship rather than an abandonment of deeply held beliefs about gender identity ethics.

In defense of pronoun hospitality, I want to briefly consider two facets of how pronoun use works to communicate meaning in the English-speaking West. First, what does pronoun refusal communicate to transgender people? Second, what does pronoun hospitality communicate (and what does it not communicate) to transgender people? In each case, recognizing that the transgender umbrella is far too broad to be reduced to a single perspective, my goal isn't to make claims about how all people will perceive language at all times. Instead, I'll present the testimony of transgender individuals on these questions, letting them speak for themselves.

What does pronoun refusal communicate to transgender people?

One of the dangers of refusing to use the pronouns with which a transgender person identifies is that this refusal can communicate a lack of respect for that person's experiences and self-understanding. That is, rather than communicating a moral objection to non-normative gender identities, pronoun refusal can communicate a level of disdain that is likely to sever any existing relationship and foreclose the possibility of future relationship.

Ian, one of my interviewees, explains, "When people aggressively use female pronouns for me, I feel shamed, invisible, and sidelined. I lose hope of ever really belonging." Although shame and invisibility may not be the meanings intended by those who refuse to use his male pronouns, the decision by these speakers to ignore his self-understanding of gender identity communicates these meanings just the same. Another transgender author similarly describes the feeling of hearing pronouns they don't identify with used about them as a kind of erasure: "It feels as though my soul, my body, my being fades further and further into total disappearance."[26]

Another one of my interviewees privately identifies as genderqueer with "they/them/their" pronouns but is still closeted and struggling to discern what faithfulness to Jesus will mean for their gender identity. When they hear Christians insist on using only pronouns that align with a person's appointed sex, they report feeling conflicted: "I don't know that I even fully disagree theologically, at least on some days. But I feel the message that I am a toxic leper who needs to be banished outside of society. They cannot allow

themselves to be defiled by the use of 'wrong' pronouns, for to do so would be to participate in direct rebellion against God." When other Christians insist on using only their own definitions of pronouns for the sake of integrity, this interviewee cannot help hearing themselves categorized as a lesser priority, someone whose own experiences must be disregarded for the sake of cisgender people's consciences.

A third interviewee, who no longer identifies as transgender because of convictions about Christian gender identity but who continues to experience gender dysphoria, remembers how important pronouns were to the possibility of developing a relationship with someone: "When I was still transitioning and presenting as male, before I converted, it was crucial people used my pronouns. I wouldn't answer if they used female pronouns and corrected people if they got mine wrong. I expected the basic validation of acknowledging my gender. If someone refused to use my pronouns (not just screwed up, but refused), it was a microaggression and an explicit confirmation that they didn't value me for who I was."

Pronoun refusal can also have material consequences for transgender people. As trans author Austen Hartke points out, in cases where a transgender person has transitioned and is passing as a cisgender man or woman, "The use of someone's birth name [or pronouns corresponding to their appointed sex] might out them as transgender and put them in harm's way."[27] Some trans people risk job loss, community rejection, or even the threat of physical violence if the divergence of their gender identity from their appointed sex becomes publicly known.[28] Moreover, pronoun refusal can reawaken or exacerbate transgender

people's previous experiences of trauma, increasing the risk of self-harming behaviors.[29] An insistence on using pronouns that correspond with a person's appointed sex regardless of the circumstances can have the power to spark unintended violence.

In none of the above testimonies is there a sense that pronoun refusal serves as a useful tool for communicating beliefs about gender identity ethics. When Christians who hold a traditional understanding of gender identity ethics refuse to accommodate transgender people's pronouns as a matter of principle, they don't seem to be effectively conveying their own convictions about gender identity. Pronoun refusal certainly doesn't seem to be understood by transgender people as a loving call to surrender their internal sense of gender identity to Jesus no matter the cost. Pronoun refusal is instead coded as a message of disdain, of shame, of distance, and of disrespect. Since so many people use gendered pronouns as a means of naming gender identity rather than appointed sex, pronoun refusal communicates a refusal to acknowledge that someone has adopted a transgender self-identification at all. Whether or not this meaning is the meaning that Christian conservatives mean to convey, it is the meaning that many transgender people are likely to receive.

What does pronoun hospitality communicate (and what does it not communicate) to transgender people?

None of my interviewees were inclined to interpret a cisgender Christian's pronoun hospitality as an automatic indication that this Christian agreed with everything about the way in which the trans person expressed their gender.

Instead, pronoun hospitality signaled an acknowledgment of the trans person's experience, a respect for their choices about self-expression, and a desire to be in relationship regardless of disagreement. Put differently, these interviewees saw the cisgender Christian's willingness to define gendered pronouns in terms of *gender identity* rather than *appointed sex* as an indication that that person was willing show respect for the existence of non-cisgender identities.

One interviewee who is not publicly out explained that, when some of their close friends asked what pronouns would be most honoring to use, their initial reaction was to think, "Wow, you do actually care about me?!" This person went on to explain how valuable questions like that have been for forming deep relationships with fellow Christians: "It's those types of questions that have started unraveling some layers of shame I didn't even know existed."

Another interviewee emphasized that Christians shouldn't avoid pronoun hospitality simply out of fear that they might be seen as fully affirming of transgender identity. For this interviewee, pronoun hospitality simply signaled respect: "Using my pronouns didn't mean people agreed with me or my decision to transition. It just meant that they viewed me as equally human and deserving of respect." The ethics of Christian gender identity could (and indeed did) come up in subsequent conversations—but those conversations were possible only because cisgender Christians were first willing to reconsider the way they used gendered pronouns with this interviewee in order to truthfully communicate their desire to be in relationship.

Most of all, pronoun hospitality creates space for transgender people to be loved and encouraged and pointed towards Jesus regardless of theological agreement or disagreement on matters of gender identity ethics. Ian, one of my interviewees, articulates this principle clearly: "When people use male-coded language, I feel like they care about me as a person. They might not understand me and they might hope hope hope that God will feminize me, but I feel like they have decided to actually love me rather than coerce me into blending into their expectations of me." By practicing pronoun hospitality, we create safe relational spaces within which the Holy Spirit can do whatever work he chooses.

Pronoun hospitality is not about demanding that those who hold a traditional understanding of Christian gender identity ethics depart from this view. Nor is it about asking people to violate their consciences by "lying" in the pronouns they use. Instead, pronoun hospitality is about Christians of all stripes choosing to recognize the multiple ways that gendered pronouns can work and have meaning in modern English, and choosing to speak in such a way that we communicate truthful messages of love, welcome, and mutual respect to transgender people. Adapting our language as cisgender Christians to make room for our transgender neighbors is certainly not the only form of hospitality we can show, but it is a simple and powerful gesture that can make future, more substantial expressions of hospitality possible.

Notes

1. My own views on this question are still very much a work in progress, and the last thing I want is to presume to defend a view of which I'm not yet fully convinced in my own mind.

2. A cisgender person is one whose gender identity matches the gender identity normatively aligned with their appointed sex.

3. This use of "transgender" (or simply "trans") as an umbrella for a number of non-normative gender identities is fairly common in both popular and academic literature.

4. Walker, "He, She, Ze, Zir? Navigating Pronouns While Loving Your Transgender Neighbor," *ERLC.com*, 4 Dec. 2017, https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/he-she-ze-zir-navigating-pronouns-while-loving-your-transgender-neighbor.

5. Burk, "Bruce or Caitlyn? He or She? Should Christians Accommodate Transgender Naming?", 4 June 2015, http://www.dennyburk.com/bruce-or-caitlyn-he-or-she-should-christians-accomodate-transgender-naming/.

6. https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/

7. Piper, "He or She? How Should I Refer to Transgender Friends?", *Ask Pastor John*, 16 July 2015, https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/he-or-she-how-should-i-refer-to-transgender-friends.

8. Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say About Gender Identity*, The Good Book Company, 2017, p. 156.

9. Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate*, p. 156.

10. Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate,* p. 157.

11. Walker, "He, She, Ze, Zir?"

12. Burk, "Bruce or Caitlyn?"

13. Gagnon, "How Should Christians Respond to the Transgender Phenomenon?", *First Things*, 16 Oct. 2015, https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/10/how-should-christians-respond-to-the-transgender-phenomenon

14. See the Oxford English Dictionary's entry on "gender, n.", Oxford University Press, March 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/77468.

15. For instance, some words for human males and females were neuter in gender. A simple example of this phenomenon is the Greek word *paidion*, "child," which is neuter in form even though the children in question were usually if not always understood to be male or female.

16. See, for example, Matt. 10:20; Rom. 8:16, 8:26.

17. See John 14:26, 15:26, 16:7.

18. Torah scholar David E. S. Stein argues that grammatical gender in the Old Testament serves a primarily syntactic function and is often not meant to signal the inclusion or exclusion of a particular sex. See Stein, "Gender Representation in Biblical Hebrew," in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, edited by Geoffrey Khan, 2013.

19. In Spanish, *el* (singular) and *los* (plural) are masculine, while *la* (singular) and *las* (plural) are feminine. In French, *le* (singular) is masculine and *la* (singular) is feminine, while *les* is plural for both genders. All these words translate to the single genderless English word "the."

20. Of course, as we noted previously, the phrase "sex assigned at birth" is meant to challenge the seeming inherency of the way physically perceptible states are interpreted or even altered by parents and medical

professionals, as in the case of some intersex individuals.

21. This editor's note appears in Mark Yarhouse, "Understanding the Transgender Phenomenon," *Christianity Today*, 8 June 2015, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/july-august/understanding-transgender-gender-dysphoria.html.

22. For example, though some people cite the rise of the singular "they" and of neologisms (recently created words) like "ze" as proof of language's corruption, such developments simply reflect the same kind of societal negotiation by which language has always evolved. As Merriam-Webster Dictionary explains, "*they* has been in consistent use as a singular pronoun since the late 1300s"; in addition, "the development of singular *they* mirrors the development of the singular *you* from the plural *you*, yet we don't complain that singular *you* is ungrammatical" (https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/singular-nonbinary-they). By the same token, invented words in general—take the verb "google" as a recent example—are a sign of language's vitality far more than they are of its degradation. We don't need to be ethically enthused by the trends these shifts in language represent to recognize that they truly are shifts and that they change the possible ways words can work in society. If we respond to someone's identification with pronouns like "they" or "ze" by arguing that these words "aren't real words" or are "bad grammar," we display our own failure to understand the fundamental mutability of language.

23. According to PCMag.com, a web cookie is "A small text file (up to 4KB) created by a website that is stored in the user's computer either temporarily for that session only or permanently on the hard disk (persistent cookie). Cookies provide a way for the website to recognize you and keep track of your preferences" (https://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia/term/40334/cookie).

24. All biblical quotations are taken from the NIV.

25. Yarhouse, "Understanding the Transgender Phenomenon."

26. Sebastian Zulch, "How Being Misgendered Feels Traumatizing For Me," *HelloFlo*, 30 Nov. 2016, http://helloflo.com/misgendered-feels-traumatizing/.

27. Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2018, p. 84.

28. Transgender people, and especially trans women of color, are disproportionately the targets of violent attacks. The murder rate for transgender women of color between the ages of 15 and 34 is more than four times higher than average rate for all Americans in that age group. See Maggie Astor, "Violence Against Transgender People Is on the Rise, Advocates Say," *The New York Times*, 9 Nov. 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/us/transgender-women-killed.html.

29. Suicidality among transgender people is far higher than the national average, a risk that has been shown to decrease among people who feel free to express their chosen gender identities. According to a report by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law, 41% of transgender people have attempted suicide, roughly nine times the US population average of 4.6% (see Ann P. Haas, Philip L. Rodgers, and Jody L. Herman, "Suicide Attempts among Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Adults," https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/AFSP-Williams-Suicide-Report-Final.pdf, p. 2). For one study on the inverse relationship between suicidality and gender identity accommodation, see Stephen T. Russell, Amanda M. Pollitt, Gu Li, and Arnold H. Grossman, "Chosen Name Use Is Linked to Reduced Depressive Symptoms, Suicidal Ideation, and Suicidal Behavior Among Transgender Youth," *Journal of Adolescent Health*, available online 30 March 2018.

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