

THE CENTER FOR
FAITH, SEXUALITY & GENDER

Pastoral Paper

WRITTEN BY:
DR. PRESTON SPRINKLE

14

GUIDANCE FOR CHURCHES ON MEMBERSHIP, BAPTISM,
COMMUNION, SERVICE, AND LEADERSHIP FOR TRANS* PEOPLE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction **PG. 1**

What Does it Mean to Be Trans*? **PG. 4**

Trans* Identities, Gender Dysphoria, and Christian Discipleship **PG. 7**

Thinking Through Policies and Discipleship **PG. 12**

Membership: Belonging to the Family **PG. 15**

Baptism **PG. 18**

Communion **PG. 20**

Service and Leadership **PG. 21**

Concluding Thoughts **PG. 24**

Appendix A: Sample Leadership Covenant about Trans* Identities **PG. 25**

Notes **PG. 28**

Introduction

This paper is a guide to help church leaders think clearly, consistently, and biblically about policies regarding membership, baptism, communion (or Eucharist), service, and leadership for trans* people. Trans* people are created in God's image, and they share many things in common with non-trans* people. However, trans* people also go through unique life experiences and wrestle with questions others don't (for example, "Should I transition?"). We will discuss these and other questions below. Before we do, let me make seven preliminary comments.

First, a word about language. I will use the phrase *trans* people* as an umbrella description of both people who identify as transgender (among other identities) and people who experience gender dysphoria but don't identify as transgender. When I attach an asterisk to trans*, this indicates that I'm using it as a broad umbrella term that includes identities such as transgender, non-binary, gender fluid, agender, pangender, genderqueer, and many others.

Second, I have been tremendously blessed by many trans* people in my life. Therefore, I come at this topic with a bias, and my bias is this: Trans* people are needed in the church. The church will look more like Jesus if it has more trans* people in it, not fewer. Jesus loves and values such people and wants to be in relationship with them.

Many trans* people have faced tremendous challenges in their lives. They have been ostracized by churches and misunderstood by society. Some wrestle with cooccurring mentalhealth issues that can accompany their life

experiences. I have been impressed and challenged by the profound resilience that many trans* people embody. And I've seen this resilience, when it is crystalized with faith, turn out some of the most zealous followers of Jesus I know. The church would do well to see trans* people as not just *needy* but *needed*.

Third, the transgender conversation includes many biblical, theological, and scientific issues that we won't have time to address in this paper. I have worked through many of these questions in my book *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say* (David C Cook, 2021). The discussion in this paper will assume conclusions addressed much more thoroughly in my book.

Fourth, I assume that my audience comes from a diverse group of churches, many of which will have different policies, denominational standards, and ecclesiological structures. My goal, therefore, is not to provide a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all answer to every question. Instead, my goal is to help you think through the various issues involved so that you can contextualize a response in your own church with clarity, compassion, and conviction.

Fifth, this paper is written for Christian leaders. Trans* people make up a small proportion of the population at large, and they likewise make up a small proportion of Christian leaders. Writing about trans* people for a predominantly non-trans* audience can easily create an "us/them" tone which feels othering and judgmental. This is not at all my intention, and I've

tried to alleviate this tone as much as possible. A paper about pastoral issues and church policies for trans* people will inevitably discuss the lives and behaviors of such people; however, my hope is to frame this discussion in a way that honors the individuals about whom I am writing.

Sixth, church policies and practices should be shaped by both radical grace and radical obedience. The call to follow Jesus is open to all without distinction: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest,” says Jesus (Matt. 11:28). The church should embody the radical welcome of God—a place where all are invited to belong. The church should have a wide-open door. Yet this door leads to a narrow road and a difficult journey. Jesus’ invitation to “Come to me” is followed by a demand: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me” (Matt. 11:28). While Jesus’ yoke is much lighter than that of the Pharisees—“my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:29)—it is accompanied with sacrifice, self-denial, persecution, and taking counter-cultural stances that could lead to death. “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me,” Jesus says. “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it” (Luke 9:23-24). The radical

welcome of God is tethered to a call to radical obedience. Any discussion of church policies and practices is never simply about membership or leadership or service *per se*, but ultimately about being conformed into the image of Christ. Policies and statements are instruments of discipleship for those gladly submitting to the lordship of Christ.

Lastly, I want to encourage leaders to be extra sensitive in how they publicly discuss trans*-related issues, since many trans* people have been through traumatic experiences that can be triggered by flippant and uncaring words. Mason, for instance, was raised in a religious household and came out as trans* at 12 years old. His parents kicked him out of the house, so he wandered the streets for a few years. Some of Mason’s friends (who are also friends of mine) didn’t hear from him for almost two years. They assumed he was dead. Fortunately, Mason reached out to them recently to let them know he’s still alive. But Mason wants nothing to do with church, Jesus, religion, or religious people. When he was young, Mason was sexually abused by his two uncles and then by his priest just minutes before his priest publicly confirmed him in the Catholic church. If, by God’s grace, Mason did happen to wander into a church and hear a

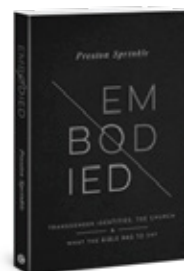
NOW AVAILABLE FROM THE CENTER

EMBODIED

Transgender Identities, The Church, and What the Bible Has to Say

An accessible guide for Christians who want help navigating the transgender conversation.

Available at [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)



pastor talking about trans* people, I would hope that pastor's words would be soaked with grace.

How we talk about trans* people is just as important as what we believe about trans*-related issues. This paper, therefore, covers a delicate topic. And while my audience is mostly non-trans* Christian leaders, I'm writing it as if trans* people are listening in. Because I know you are, and I'm very thankful for this.

While this paper will discuss policies related to church membership, baptism, communion, service, and leadership, it will take us a while to get there. We will first discuss what it means to be trans* and the diverse kinds of experiences included under this umbrella identity. We will then consider some of the ethical questions surrounding trans* identities and experiences, since these questions necessarily inform how we think through policies and church practices with trans* people in mind. Next, I will lay out several preliminary thoughts about the relationship between church policies and discipleship for trans* people. These thoughts will lead into a discussion about membership, followed by shorter discussions about baptism, communion, service, and leadership for trans* people. I've also included a sample church policy statement as Appendix A.

What Does it Mean to Be Trans*?

Trans* is an umbrella term that includes many different identities and experiences. Each one carries with it a particular nuance, but almost all of them convey some sense of incongruence a person feels with their biological sex. Trans* identities can include a variety of experiences, psychological challenges, and desires that are important to understand if the church is going to effectively disciple trans* people. For instance, a trans* person might have one or more of the following experiences as part of their journey:

- *Early Onset Gender Dysphoria.* Gender dysphoria is the distress some people feel as a result of the incongruence they experience with their biological sex. This distress can range from mild and periodic to severe and constant, even to the point of diminishing a person's capacity to do basic life tasks. Some people have experienced this incongruence from the time they were 3 years old. For most kids (61-88%),¹ the dysphoria goes away after adolescence; however, others continue to experience dysphoria their entire lives. Dysphoria is mild for some people and quite intense for others. For some, it comes in waves and is triggered by certain events, while for others it feels like a constant hum
- *Late Onset Gender Dysphoria.* Although the onset of puberty alleviates dysphoria for some people, others develop dysphoria during or after adolescence. This kind of dysphoria is called Late Onset Gender Dysphoria. Within this category, some psychologists have proposed a subcategory called Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria (ROGD), in which dysphoria begins partly as a result of social influences (similar to how

eating disorders can spread through social contagion among teenage females). While the category of ROGD is controversial, the evidence for *some* level of social influence underlying the identity of *some* trans* teenagers is indisputable. In any case, ROGD experiences should not become the lenses through which Christians view all trans* experiences.

- *Autogynephilia.* This is another contested term some psychologists have used to describe a particular kind of experience that seems to only affect biological males. Autogynephilia means "the love of oneself as a woman," and it refers to the erotic desire to view oneself as a woman. Males who experience autogynephilia tend to be stereotypically masculine, are attracted to women, have a history of cross-dressing in private, and, if they transition, usually do so later in life. Autogynephilia is a very different experience from the experiences of other trans* people who are attracted to the same biological sex and resonate more with the gender stereotypes of the opposite sex (a biological female who is stereotypically masculine and attracted to women, or a male who is stereotypically feminine and attracted to men).
- *Self-Identification with No Gender Dysphoria.* In recent years, some people who don't experience gender dysphoria have begun identifying as trans*; their reasons for doing so may vary. The pattern of people without dysphoria identifying as trans* has become known as the "self-ID" perspective. "I don't need a doctor to tell me I'm trans*," these

trans* folks might say. “If I say I’m trans*, then I’m trans*.”

- *Gender Dysphoria with no Trans* Identity.* As stated above, some people experience gender dysphoria but don’t identify as trans* (or any identity included under this label). Trans* identities can (but don’t always) convey certain political or social cues that some people with dysphoria may not resonate with. Or they may see trans* identities as not representing how they view themselves. For instance, a male with gender dysphoria might not view himself as transgender, nonbinary, or genderqueer—but simply as a male with gender dysphoria.
- *Psychological Challenges.* Many trans* people experience psychological challenges (depression or anxiety, for example) as a result of their dysphoria. In some cases, however, people report identifying as trans* as a result of a psychological challenge. For instance, some detransitioners have linked their former trans* identity to a past trauma like physical or sexual abuse. Others have said they had internalized homophobia and saw transitioning as a way of becoming straight. Still others say they suffered from internalized misogyny—they hated being female because they had a negative and warped view of femaleness. In such cases, dealing with past trauma or negative internalized beliefs may help to diminish dysphoria.

“If you’ve met one trans* person, you’ve met... one trans* person,” Dr. Mark Yarhouse likes to say. The first thing pastors need to understand is that being trans* has more than one meaning. If a church member or aspiring member tells you

they’re trans*, all you know about that person is that they just told you they’re trans*. There is no one-size-fits-all next step in this person’s discipleship journey. Pastoring and discipling a person with Early Onset Gender Dysphoria will look much different from pastoring a person with no dysphoria who self-identifies as trans*, or someone who experiences autogynephilia, or someone whose trans* identity might be intertwined with past trauma.

*The Ontology of Trans**

Most trans* people experience some kind of incongruence or discomfort with their biological sex. This reality raises an important ontological question that leaders should work through prior to developing their policies around trans* people. The question is this:²

If someone experiences incongruence between their biological sex and their internal sense of self, which one determines who they are—and why?

For example: if a biological male feels or thinks or believes that they are a woman, are they a woman or a man? If they have an internal sense that they are female, and their body is biologically male, which one are they, and why? Is the body or mind more definitive for determining who we are? These aren’t abstract intellectual questions akin to “how many angels can stand on the head of a pin?” They are foundational questions central to what discipleship looks like for Christians who experience such incongruence.

The question of incongruence is ultimately a question about human *ontology*. Ontology is a philosophical term that has to do with the nature

of being; specifically, what does it mean to be human, especially a sexed embodied human? Ontology isn't just a fancy philosophical concept that should be locked up in the ivory towers of academia. It's actually fundamental for discipleship, or becoming more like Christ. We need to first understand who we *are* (ontology) before we know what it means to become who God wants us to *be* (discipleship). Ontology is integral to discipleship, because discipleship means living as we were designed to live—living as divine images.

After spending many pages in my book *Embodied* wrestling with questions related to ontology, I came to the conclusion, both biblically and scientifically, that our sexed bodies are essential to personhood, even if, for whatever reason, our minds don't resonate with our bodies. Part of Christian discipleship, then, should be patiently striving to accept our sexed bodies as part of our human identity. For instance, if a disciple of Christ is unambiguously biologically female, then part of Christian discipleship should be learning to accept and embrace their biological sex as part of the identity they've been given by God.

Now, I appreciate the fact that many leaders have not had the opportunity to engage all the philosophical, theological, biblical, and scientific issues related to such ontological questions. In no way do I want leaders to simply assume that my conclusion above is correct; rather, I invite all leaders to take their own journey into this conversation and formulate policies (on membership, baptism, etc.) based on their convictions. Many of my recommendations in this paper will be shaped by my own beliefs about human ontology, but I will also help leaders think through their own policies, even if they differ from me in their theological and ontological beliefs.

It's also important to keep in mind that not every trans*-identified person has the same ontological assumptions. For some, "being trans*" might mean, *I believe I was born in the wrong body and my biological sex is not the real me*. For others, "being trans*" might mean, *I was born female and believe I am a female, but I identify as "trans*" in order to describe the dysphoria I experience*. Still others may use "trans*" to describe the fact that they don't resonate with masculine or feminine stereotypes. Some trans* people medically transition to the opposite sex, others partially transition, still others transition only socially (but not medically), and some may never transition. There are also people who experience gender dysphoria or have autogynephiliac desires but don't identify as trans*.

Being trans* or experiencing dysphoria is not just one thing. Trans* identities come with many different ontological assumptions about who each trans* person truly is.

Trans* Identities, Gender Dysphoria, and Christian Discipleship

What does it mean for a trans* person to live as a follower of Jesus? First of all—and I can't say this loudly enough—many trans* people are already following Jesus more faithfully, more passionately, more consistently, more boldly than other non-trans* Christians. At least, that's been my experience. Just because someone has different experiences and faces different challenges than those in the majority doesn't mean they aren't a *real* disciple of Jesus. Living with gender dysphoria alone is enough to cripple the average Christian and raise all kinds of doubts about the goodness of God. The fact that so many Christians with dysphoria are still pursuing Christ—in the face of ridicule, misunderstanding, or deafening silence about their existence—should send non-trans* Christians to their knees asking God for the same spiritual power and resilience. Jesus wants more trans* and dysphoric people in His church, not less. So should we.

All of this is our starting point. Once this truth is firmly established in the hearts of pastors and leaders, we will also need to think through particular questions of discipleship in relation to the trans* people we are called to love, learn from, and care for. This investigation will inevitably lead us to think through specific discipleship questions that may have ethical connotations—all of which are more complicated than some people think. (Again, I discuss the following issues at much greater length in my book *Embodied*.)

Before addressing things that *might be* ethical questions, I want to mention two categories that

to my mind are clearly *not* ethical questions: gender dysphoria and gender stereotypes.

Experiencing gender dysphoria is not a sin. That is, feeling an unwanted sense of distress over your biological sex is not a sin; it is not a sin to suffer from a psychological condition. What we do with this experience could lead to sin, but the experience itself is not sin. I see no biblical reason for withholding membership, baptism, or other church practices from someone simply because they experience gender dysphoria. If someone is suffering from severe dysphoria, it may not be wise for them to serve in a leadership position, both for their own health and for the health of the congregation. (This goes for any aspiring leader, trans* or otherwise, who is suffering from severe psychological distress.) But this kind of decision should never be made on ethical grounds. We should never give the impression that a person with dysphoria is morally unfit for leadership merely by virtue of their dysphoria.

Rejecting gender stereotypes also isn't an ethical issue. If a female wears short hair, plays sports, and doesn't like to wear dresses, they have not done anything ethically wrong. If a male plays a harp, writes poetry, and tends to cry a lot, we should never make them feel like they're in sin or not a "real man." Otherwise, King David wasn't a "real man."

Many of our assumptions about what it means to be a man or be a woman are shaped by cultural views of masculinity and femininity. Biblically, there are very few *ethical* requirements specific to men that don't apply to women, or specific to

women that don't apply to men.³ If a trans* person doesn't resonate with the stereotypical behavior and interests common among people of their biological sex, we shouldn't view these differences as ethical issues.

While neither experiencing gender dysphoria nor rejecting gender stereotypes is an ethical issue, several other questions common among trans* experiences might carry more ambiguity. The first is identity.

Trans* Identities

Should a disciple of Christ publicly take on a trans* identity (transgender, nonbinary, gender queer, etc.)?

Godly and wise Christians differ on this question. This difference exists in part because identity labels mean different things to different people. And while non-trans* people often don't understand the meaning of these labels or appreciate why someone might use them, some trans* people find it useful for discipleship to name their unique experience. One friend of mine, a sold-out believer in Jesus, describes herself as "transgender." She basically uses the term as a shorthand for the fact that she experiences gender dysphoria. She could say she's "gender dysphoric," or "a Christian who experiences gender dysphoria," or "transgender." For her, all these descriptions mean basically the same thing. I hope no thoughtful church leader would claim it's sin to say "I'm a Christian who also experiences gender dysphoria" or "I'm a Christian who feels a sense of incongruence with my biological sex." For my friend, saying "I'm transgender" means the same thing. When she says she is trans*, she's not saying that she thinks

she was born in the wrong body or "really is" a man on the inside.

Other people might identify as trans* and mean something more ontologically significant by that identity. Another friend of mine who identifies as trans* uses the term "trans*" to mean that, though they are biologically male, they really are a woman. Again, trans* can mean many different things to different people. We should get to know actual trans* people, not cast judgement about identities from a distance.

In short, the relationship between trans* identities and membership, baptism, communion, service, and leadership should be discussed in a thoughtful, loving manner that seeks to understand—*truly* understand—what a person means by an identity term. Only then can we begin to discuss what faithful discipleship might look like for that individual.

The Pronoun Debate⁴

Another question with potential ethical implications is whether Christians should use a trans* person's pronouns and chosen name. In other words, if a biological male identifies as female, should you use the name they've chosen for themselves or their birth name (what trans* people call their "deadname")? And which pronouns should you use? The set that matches their biological sex, in this case *he/him*? Or the one that matches their gender identity, in this case *she/her*? Or what if a trans* person identifies with *they/them* pronouns rather than *he/him* or *she/her*? Is that okay? Is it grammatically correct? And what about other recently minted pronouns like *ze* or *hir*?

These are tough questions, and committed Christians disagree on what to do. Some say that it's a lie to use a person's pronoun that doesn't reflect their biological sex. Others say that using their pronouns is an act of Christian hospitality—meeting another person where they're at—even if you disagree. I discuss this issue at length in my book *Embodied* and have come to believe that in most situations it would be better for Christians to use someone's chosen pronouns and especially their name.⁵ But again, my main point here is to encourage church leaders to figure out whether they view pronoun usage as an *ethical* issue, and what kind of counsel they would recommend to members needing guidance. Since this issue can be particularly volatile, it's important to thoroughly understand the arguments on both sides before coming to a conclusion. It can be more complicated than some may think.

Transitioning and Christian Discipleship

Ethical questions surrounding transitioning might be among the most difficult and debated. And those of us who don't experience gender dysphoria need to be extra cautious about how we discuss transitioning. Like many of you, I've never lain in bed all day with "an electric current through my body that caused my joints to ache, my stomach [to] turn, my hands [to] shake, and nausea in the most severe moments of dysphoria"—as one of my friends describes it. I've never felt like I had a "creepy serum... injected all over my body to create an odd, numb yet painful feeling coursing through my blood vessels and seeping into my flesh."⁶ I've never felt the burst of hope, beaming like a ray of sun on a crisp spring day, upon hearing that this misery, these suicidal thoughts, might disappear if I transitioned. I've

never scoured the internet chasing this hope to find out if it was real, only to find expert after expert and story after story affirming it. Relief exists. There can be an end to the shaking and nausea and creepy serum coursing through my veins.

Those of us who look down our noses at *those people over there* who transition will never be in a good place to even talk about the various ethical questions that surround transitioning. Empathy shouldn't determine ethics, but neither is empathy irrelevant to Christian discipleship. As a first step for Christian leaders, I would highly recommend sitting down with a few trans* people simply to listen to and try to understand what their experiences feel like. Only then will we be able to think clearly and humanly about our church policies regarding trans* people who have transitioned or are considering transitioning.

My book *Embodied* thoroughly discusses the ontological, ethical, and practical questions surrounding transitioning, so I will only treat it briefly here.⁷ After considering the issue of transitioning from various angles, I've come to believe that transitioning does not resonate with the way of Christ. In other words, I believe that biological sex is a significant part of human identity and is directly related to how we bear God's image in the world (Gen. 1:27). Christian discipleship should be consistent with our sexed embodiment, not in contradiction to it. But churches, and especially leaders, need to work through these questions for themselves. My purpose here is simply to talk about the kinds of questions church leaders should wrestle with.

Transitioning isn't one thing. There are actually three main kinds, or phases, of transitioning: social, hormonal, and surgical.

Social transitioning typically involves a person publicly taking on a new name and pronouns, presenting themselves in ways not stereotypically associated with their biological sex. Do these decisions have an ethical component, or are they ethically neutral? As I've argued above, we should never demand that someone embody the stereotypical behaviors and interests common to their biological sex. But if someone presents themselves in a way that's more typical of the opposite sex *in order to identify and be seen as the opposite sex*, this action is different than simply wearing their hair short or presenting in ways outside the norm of their biological sex. The heart of the matter is just that—the heart. We shouldn't focus on policing everyone's external behavior. Instead, we need to listen to and help people think through the intentions behind their actions—especially when ambiguity surrounds those actions.

Hormonal transition involves taking cross-sex hormones: that is, hormones typically produced at much higher levels in the opposite sex. This type of transition is a more invasive step toward identifying and presenting as a different sex. Aside from the possible dangerous side effects and the irreversible changes that result from sustained use,⁸ our primary question should be, “*Why is someone pursuing this kind of transition?*”

Surgical transition comes in various forms. “Top surgery” for biological females (that is, a double mastectomy) is the most common of these surgeries. But there are many other kinds of surgery that a person might pursue. Surgical transitioning is the most invasive and irreversible of the forms of transition.

As church leaders learn about the different kinds of transitioning, we should grapple with the

rationale that underlies our beliefs about what kinds of behavior resonate with the way of Jesus and what kinds of behavior do not. Are the boundaries we draw truly biblical boundaries, or are they motivated by personal preference or prejudice? In addition, we should pay close attention to people's motivations for transitioning. If a biological female wants to transition to male because they have internalized misogyny and believe women are inferior to men, that would not be healthy reason to transition—even if the leaders don't think that transitioning *per se* is wrong. I would also question whether it's wise for a person with autogynephilia (an erotic desire to view themselves as a woman) to transition. But what if someone has lived with life-long debilitating gender dysphoria, has tried everything possible to alleviate it, has become severely suicidal as a result, and is surrounded by friends, family, and medical professionals who tell them that transitioning will take away the dysphoria and their suicidal thoughts? Even if we don't agree that transitioning resonates with the way of Jesus, we can still appreciate the motivations that differ from individual to individual.

Another factor leaders should think through is the age at which a person desires to transition. Even many people who are completely supportive of transition for adults have expressed concerns about teenagers transitioning. Teenage years are already tumultuous. Going through puberty can be socially and psychologically distressing for many people and for many reasons. Female teenagers in particular often deal with body image challenges—especially in our Instagram age. Teens change identities, interests, friend groups, and their minds all the time. Gender identity—despite what you may hear—is *not* immutable for everyone.⁹ Therefore, churches

thinking through their views on transitioning might want to give special thought to how to disciple youth considering transitioning.

Aside from transitioning, church leaders should also consider what we believe about sexual relationships for trans* people. Churches that hold to a traditional sexual ethic believe that marriage and sex are reserved for one man and one woman. But what does this mean for trans* people? If a transman wants to marry a woman, would you perform the ceremony?

Before you answer that question, you would need to sort out a couple things.

First, what do you believe about the relationship between gender identity and biological sex? A transman is a biological female whose gender identity (their internal sense of self) is male. So if a transman (biological female) identifies as a man and wants to marry a female, then in terms of biology, this is an same-*sex* marriage, even though it is an opposite-*gender* marriage. Would you perform this wedding ceremony? Why, or why not?

Second, and related, does your policy change at all if someone “passes” very well? (“Passing” refers to the level by which a trans* person is socially recognized as the gender they identify with.) It may sound like we’re getting lost in the weeds, but this is actually an important question. Because if you believe that biological sex determines identity, and that people of opposite biological sexes can date and get married, then how would you disciple a person whose biological sex is clearly opposite from their partner yet passes completely as the gender they identify with? If Blaire White walked into your church holding hands with her boyfriend, nobody would think anything of it. (If you Google her

picture, you’ll see what I mean.) Conservative grandmothers might eagerly ask if the young couple is married yet—even though Blaire is biologically male. Does the fact that she socially passes as female matter?

These scenarios are not problems, but pastoral opportunities. We should be zealous to cultivate church communities that are so warm, so welcoming, so intentional, and so loving that even those who may not look or act very churchy are compelled to come.

Thinking Through Policies and Discipleship

I hope that understanding the diversity of trans* people and trans* experiences makes us cautious of formulating one-size-fits-all policies about membership, baptism, communion, service, and leadership for trans* people. Such people and experiences vary widely. If policies and statements need to be written, I would avoid using general terms, which could carry many different meanings, to describe different kinds of experiences. For instance, instead of formulating a stance on “transitioning,” it’s better to unpack what you mean by the term, show awareness of the different stages of transitioning, perhaps distinguish between teens and adults (even if your policy is the same for both), and make a distinction between identifying/presenting as the opposite sex (which your church may or may not support) and simply not conforming to culturally determined gender stereotypes.

Churches should also consider approaching discipleship differently for a current church member considering transition than they would for someone who has already transitioned and

desires to become a church member. What do membership, service, and leadership look like for a convert who transitioned prior to coming to Christ? (Or simply prior to coming to your church?) Does discipleship include detransitioning back to their biological sex? Can they “remain as they are”? And *why*? Some situations are black and white, while others are greyer, and I think this scenario falls among the latter. In any case, here are a few suggestions.¹⁰

First, Christians should want trans* people—whether non-transitioned or transitioned—to flood our churches. The more the merrier, I say. It’ll create loads of beautiful pastoral opportunities, and some Christians will get uncomfortable and leave. So be it. I don’t think church should be limited to squeaky clean Christians who (think they) have all their stuff together, or who keep their porn, their greed, their pride, and their lack of concern for the poor hidden behind dusty hymnals. I want churches filled with those who know their brokenness, who don’t hide their pain, who ask very hard

NOW AVAILABLE FROM THE CENTER

CHRISTIAN SEXUALITY

This 12-part, video-based, comprehensive discipleship experience will help youth leaders, mentors, and parents engage their youth in one of the most important conversations of our age.

Only available at www.christian-sexuality.com



questions. If a trans* person who has transitioned is coming to your church, praise God. I hope they are treated with the utmost kindness and respect. All the difficult questions about what to do now are secondary to creating communities that embody God's kindness which draws people to himself (Rom. 2:4)—*especially* those who've been marginalized by the church.

If Jesus were a pastor today, I suspect he'd have loads of trans* people attending his church. Do they want to attend yours?

Second, meaningful relationship requires taking a good deal of time to get to know and learn from a trans* person. Hear their story. Ask good questions. *Real* questions, not interrogative ones. Remember, people transition for all kinds of different reasons. You have no clue what this person has been going through until you really get to know them. Policies and doctrinal statements might have their place, but they can't replace sharing a meal with a fellow image bearer of God.

I do believe that one long-term goal of discipleship is for all believers to identify with their biological sex. But what this looks like for trans* Christians who have already undergone surgery might be different than it would for other trans* Christians who have only socially transitioned or have not transitioned at all. If a biological female has socially transitioned to male, this might mean they have cut their hair short, stopped wearing makeup, and started wearing blue jeans. If this person wants to realign with her biological sex, that realignment might be primarily a heart (and mind) change, since makeup and dresses and long hair aren't required to live as female.

When it comes to someone who's been on

hormones and wants to realign with their biological sex, a new set of challenges arises. As much as taking cross-sex hormones (referred to as CHT) can be hard on the body and mind, getting off these hormones can be equally difficult. What if there are medical complications? What about the psychological repercussions? Will you be there for your trans* friend as they wrestle through this decision, committing to love and support them no matter what they decide? And if they do choose to stop CHT, will you be there for them all the more? Will you sacrifice your time and money to embody Jesus and bear another person's burdens?

If someone has had invasive surgeries, the choice to detransition is incredibly difficult. Most of these surgeries are irreversible. Plus, just as surgical transition is expensive, so are detransitioning surgeries. *If* a person does desire to detransition and can't afford it, then I'd recommend that the Christian community come alongside the person and help (or flat out) pay for it. On the other hand, a person might come to identify with their biological sex mentally, spiritually, and socially, yet physically still have a transitioned body that resembles the opposite sex. It may be impossible, painful, or too expensive (or all of the above) to detransition surgically. And this brings with it another set of complexities—or, as I like to call them, relational opportunities.

But some churches might not say detransitioning is a necessary part of discipleship. Again, we're dealing with a lot of grey here. Most churches wouldn't require a divorced couple who joined the church to remarry one another. We'd typically leave this decision to the couple and support them whether they remarry or remain divorced. The analogy is imperfect—as all analogies are—but it does illustrate the principle that sometimes it might be okay for a person to

“remain as they are.”¹¹

Discipleship is a long process, a journey along a road that runs right through the pearly gates. God doesn't demand overnight sanctification, and we're all thankful that he doesn't. Just think about your own sin. Your anger, your pride, your porn, your greed, your insatiable quest for comfort? How long has it been a struggle? When's the last time you messed up? No matter what you think discipleship should look like for a person who's transitioned, let's give them some space and grace to work through their obedience to Jesus in the context of a loving, non-judgmental community.

Membership: Belonging to the Family

We turn now to the first church policy that leaders should think through: Membership. We'll spend more time on membership than the other four practices, since much of what we say about membership can be transferred to other ecclesial questions.

Although many churches (especially younger churches) don't have a formal membership policy, every church has a sense of belonging and is a spiritual family. Whether this family is tight-knit or distant and dysfunctional, the spiritual status of "family" is an objective reality that was blood-bought 2,000 ago, even if it's not always subjectively experienced by the members of the church.

This is why I find it more helpful to think in terms of "family" rather than "membership"—even if membership is the language commonly used.¹² For many people, the language of membership can sound cold: it evokes the image of a "club membership" at an elite golf club in a gated community trying to keep the riff-raff out. For this reason, some churches have moved to using the language of "Family/Guest" rather than "Member/Non-Member," since we're being invited to be members not of a social club but of a family, "the household of God" (Eph. 2:19).

In a family, guests are not outsiders to be kept at bay but friends to be welcomed with hospitality. We invite guests into our living rooms, give them the best seats in the house, and lavish them with the best of our food and drink and care—we want to make them feel at home. Even if a trans* person does not want to join the family, they should be lavished with love as an honored guest at the table.

But there are expectations for those who want to join the family: *This is how we do life together.* Family needs a cohesive vision of life together. Families have household rules, expectations for service and relationship, a way of living that might look different from other families. Family membership clarifies what we believe God the Father's vision is for us as his children, adopted into his home and under the roof of his authority, through the presence of Jesus in the power of his Spirit.

In other words, guests should receive a radical welcome, and family members should be graciously challenged to live like part of the family.

High-Buffer Versus Low-Buffer

Pastor Joshua Ryan Butler, author of the companion paper to this one,¹³ developed the categories of "high-buffer" and "low-buffer" to describe the far ends of a spectrum of approaches to church membership. I will use the same categories in this paper. I don't assume that one end of this spectrum is better than the other. I simply want to articulate the unique challenges and advantages that each approach brings as it pertains to trans* inclusion.

"High-buffer" communities are those that are harder to get into, but once people are inside the circle, they often share a stronger group identity. Think, for example, of the military: there is a high bar of commitment for entrance, an expectation of significant sacrifice, and a standard of laying down your life for others "within the circle." While it's harder to get through the group's "buffer" and

join, troops are famous for the unbreakable, lifelong bond they share once inside.

“Low-buffer” communities are those that are easier to get into, but may have a weaker common identity. Think, for example, of a nightclub: there’s easy access, anyone can join (assuming you’re over 21), and it’s more inviting for a broader array of people. Low-buffer groups have the benefit of easily welcoming a broad array of people inside, and those people may form strong connections, be challenged, and grow once inside, but the community will often struggle with greater transience and a weaker group identity.

As you can see, the term “buffer” here refers to how hard it is for someone new to join the group (with *high* being “difficult” and *low* being “easy”). Let’s look at how low-buffer and high-buffer mentalities inform churches’ different approaches to membership and the sacraments, and the implications of these approaches for trans* individuals.

High-Buffer Belonging

Wherever your church lies along the high/low-buffer spectrum, your leadership will want to have a clear understanding of what it believes about the ethical questions surrounding trans* identities and experiences (trans* identities, pronouns, and transitioning), as we’ve discussed above. High-buffer churches will want to communicate clearly and up front their expectations for membership and discipleship. This goes for *all* aspiring members, not just trans* people. Expectations for generosity, justice, service, sacrifice, and love toward neighbor and enemy alike should be clearly communicated to all who want to become part of the family. And

questions unique to trans* experiences should be communicated alongside other values and expectations. Trans* people who desire to live by the family’s expectations should be welcomed in as full members of the family. There should be no unwritten rules or expectations put on members who identify as trans* or experience gender dysphoria. It would be grossly hypocritical to tell someone they’re part of the family but treat them like an annoying neighbor.

Such expectations are often communicated in a way that feels judgmental or moralistic, especially in a culture that values staying out of other people’s business. A church can avoid judgmentalism only if all its members are confessing their own sin and acknowledging their failures.

Low-Buffer Belonging

Low-buffer churches typically won’t feel the need to communicate to aspiring members what its leadership believes about ethical questions surrounding trans*-related experiences. However, I would still recommend two things to these churches:

First, leaders should engage questions about gender identity and expression and sort out what they believe, even if such beliefs don’t need to be communicated to aspiring members. There’s a good chance these questions will come up down the road. Second, if a church has *low-buffer* membership requirements but *high-buffer* leadership requirements, these differences should be communicated up front to aspiring members. For instance, if a male-to-female trans* person taking cross-sex hormones wants to join the family, and if this person would not be allowed to serve as a pastor/leader while adopting a

cross-sex identity, I find it more helpful to communicate this up front, even if the person is not, at that moment, desiring a leadership position. Someone may not want to join the family if they know that leadership in the family includes expectations they disagree with. Initial clarity helps prevent distrust down the road.

Baptism

- *High-buffer*: Some churches require catechism before baptism, for weeks or months, where catechists get a clear understanding of what they're stepping into. This practice raises the bar by requiring people to "count the cost" of following Christ before plunging beneath the waters.
- *Low-buffer*: Other churches may ask on any given Sunday, *Does anyone want to be baptized right now?* Anyone can get dunked on the spot, with a simple profession of faith and commitment to follow Jesus; there is a low buffer, or barrier, to baptism.

In the New Testament, only a confession of faith was needed for baptism. But the New Testament world already had some level of cultural understanding of what baptism meant. Jews in particular knew that baptism was a radical act symbolizing conversion to a new sect or religion. Even Gentiles had a much clearer understanding of the radicality of baptism than most modern-day Americans. So you could argue that the New Testament only requires a confession of faith to baptize someone (a low-buffer view). But you could also argue that people in the New Testament had a much greater understanding of what they were confessing and what baptism meant. (And, for what it's worth, the post-New Testament church developed some rigorous and extensive pre-baptismal expectations for new converts.) Today, things are not the same. Given how cluttered Christianity has become with misunderstandings and imported cultural values, you could discern a need—given our cultural context—for more education and greater clarity about the Christian faith a person is confessing and being baptized into (a high-buffer view).

One pastor friend of mine invited people to confess Jesus and be baptized after a Sunday sermon. Sure enough, an eager visitor came forward and confessed: "I'm totally into this Jesus person. I'm not sure about Jesus' alleged resurrection, but I'm certain about his death." To which the pastor jokingly replied, "Well, that means I'd be able to bring you under the water, but I won't be able to bring you back up." Both realized that perhaps the visitor needed more education about baptism—even for this low-buffer church.

Both high-buffer and low-buffer churches need to be clear about the radicality of baptism. This public act not only symbolizes a convert's participation in the death *and* resurrection of Christ, it also communicates the person's desire to die to their old life and be raised to a new way of living. Baptism signifies both justification and a commitment to sanctification.

Typically, though, high-buffer churches require more education prior to baptism than low-buffer churches. If a trans* person (or any new convert) confesses Jesus and desires to follow him, high-buffer churches should be clear about what they believe Christian obedience entails before they baptize the convert. Low-buffer churches might not feel the need to offer such education. However, I would still recommend that the *meaning* of baptism is clearly communicated to anyone desiring it.

If you are in a low-buffer church, most (if not all) of those being baptized will likely have all sorts of areas in their lives where they will need to work out a clearer understanding of what obedience to

Christ looks like in the years to come. (This, of course, is also true of high-buffer churches!). If you're not asking non-trans* people whether they sign onto your church's ethical beliefs before baptism, don't place a double standard on trans* people. Issues of fidelity for everyone will likely have to be worked out through your church's preaching, teaching, and discipleship practices in the regular life of the church.

Communion

- *High-buffer*: Some churches practice “closed table” communion, in which the elements are intended only for members within that church or denomination. Here there’s a stronger emphasis on communion being not only with Christ, but with the local body of Christ as a tangible community of faith, under the shepherding authority of its leadership.
- *Low-buffer*: Other churches practice “open table” communion, in which either 1) anyone who follows Jesus is invited to the table, whatever their church background or affiliation might be; or 2) anyone, including unbelievers, is welcome to the table. With these approaches, there is a stronger emphasis on the conscience of the individual to determine whether they receive communion.

Discussing communion (or the Eucharist) in the context of this paper is especially difficult, since the meaning of this practice is widely disputed across Christian churches. For some, only believers who are walking righteously should partake in communion. For others, communion offers the very grace needed to walk righteously; denying sinning members from partaking would be like trying to drive a car without fuel. In any case, whatever your church’s view on communion, the requirements (or lack thereof) for partaking should be *consistently* and *clearly* communicated.

High-buffer churches typically discourage anyone living outside of your church’s ethical standard from receiving communion. This policy should apply to everyone, not just trans* people. If a

low-buffer church believes in an open communion table, then make sure it truly is open to all. Since open table communion is ordered around the conscience of the individual before Christ, your elders will likely have to navigate the matter of anyone living outside of the church’s ethical standards through personal conversation with them. If people not abiding by your church’s ethical standards are being challenged to refrain from communion until they repent from ongoing sin, or to decide whether Christianity (or membership in this local church) is for them, such challenges should be offered to non-trans* and trans* people alike.

Communicating all these nuances to trans* people is much better when done in a one-on-one relationship. Larger churches will typically have a harder time walking with trans* people through the church’s ethical vision and their stance on communion. I do think that communion was originally designed for smaller settings. I’m not saying it *can’t* take place in larger gatherings, but larger gatherings do make it more difficult to convey all the nuances of this sacred and meaningful practice.

Service and Leadership

Finally, let's look at service and leadership. I want to look at these together, since the line between them isn't always clear. By service, I'm referring to any sort of contribution to the church other than simply sitting in a pew. Serving coffee, singing in the worship band or choir, helping out with the homeless ministry, leading a small group, and serving as a Sunday morning greeter are all acts of service but might not be considered leadership positions.

By leadership, I'm referring to paid or unpaid roles that involve teaching or high levels of influence, such as the roles of pastors, elders, directors, and Bible study leaders. As we'll see, however, the line between leadership and service is sometimes fuzzy—like when a person is starting a weekly prayer meeting or heading up a homeless ministry.

Put simply, all positions of leadership are service, but not all positions of service are leadership. And sometimes there's a messy middle where these two categories are blurred. To clear up the blurry middle, it may be helpful to consider two more categories: teaching and influence.

Most positions that involve teaching (preaching, leading a Sunday school class or Bible study) are considered to be leadership. And rightly so. The people who hold these positions are leading others through the communication of theology and ethics, which should align with the beliefs of the church. However, there are other positions of influence that might not involve teaching but still carry a good deal of influence over the hearts and minds of people.

For instance, a person in charge of an outreach to the homeless may not be considered a formal "leader" and therefore not be held to the same standards as other leaders; however, this person likely still carries a good deal of influence over people. They might be looked upon for guidance, wisdom, counsel, and *leadership*. Other such influencers might include worship leaders, volunteers in the youth group (who are discipling kids), and spouses of those in clear positions of leadership. These individuals might not be viewed as formal leaders, and they may never venture onstage to teach. But they still carry a good deal of influence, whether they know it or not.

Here is an example of how churches might classify different positions of leadership and service. I offer this not as an exhaustive list—there are many more positions we could list—but as an array of the types of positions that could be categorized according to our discussion above.

Positions of Leadership (Teaching and Influence)

- Pastor
- Elder
- Community group leader (or Bible study, life group, etc.)
- Leader of any ministry representative of the church (outreach ministry, women's groups, men's groups, youth or children's ministry, etc.)
- Leader in any discipleship ministry (youth groups, etc.)

Positions of Non-Leadership Service

- Greeter
- Worship team member
- Participant in an outreach ministry

- Sound, A/V, or other tech ministries team member
- Operational team member

Please note: My distinctions are not between important and non-important ministries, but between positions of influence/teaching and positions of service that don't carry the same degree of influence.

Some of the positions listed above defy neat categorization. A greeter, for instance, who's radically affirming of gender identity over biological sex might miscommunicate the church's vision to visitors. Every human carries *some* degree of influence over *some* people. There's no perfect formula to ensure that the church's beliefs are always communicated and embodied to everyone at all times. I'm only encouraging churches and leaders to communicate a standard with as much clarity as we can when it comes to the ethical expectations of the church. It's better to err on the side of clarity up front than to be accused of cowardice by committing the sin of bait-and-switch down the road.

Churches on the high-buffer end of the spectrum will be more prone to require that all those who serve *agree with* and be striving to *live by* the doctrine and ethics of the church. This goes for *all* those who serve—trans* and non-trans*—and for *all* of the church's doctrinal and ethical positions. As it pertains to the ethical questions about trans*-related issues (identities, pronouns, and transitioning), a high-buffer church will probably require those who serve to agree with and be living by the church's view of these issues. If so, this standard of agreement with the church's position must apply to all Christians (non-trans* and trans*) equally. Obviously,

non-trans* Christians won't be wrestling with whether they should transition; they won't be wrestling with how to live out trans*-specific questions. But they will often be faced with what they believe about trans*-related questions, especially if one of their loved ones begins to identify as trans* or experiences gender dysphoria, or if their church hires someone who is trans*.

High-buffer churches will be more reluctant to invite non-Christians or non-members to serve, even if the areas of service do not carry a lot of influence. I would like these churches to at least consider the relational and spiritual power that service can give to those who have been marginalized or dehumanized by Christians. Trans* people often feel nothing but judgment from the church, and they've sometimes been given the impression that they are unwanted, ungifted, and bring nothing to the table. When a trans* person (or anyone, really) who disagrees with a church's ethical stance on trans* issues is told they are wanted but isn't given opportunities to serve, this can easily reinforce the message, *You're not really wanted or needed here*. I'm not saying that trans* people should therefore be given free rein to serve however they want, or that such people are the only ones who have been marginalized by the church. I'm only inviting leaders to once again think about the actual people who are affected by our policies.

Low-buffer churches typically won't require people to agree with (or be living by) the church's doctrinal and ethical beliefs in order to serve. However, when it comes to leadership positions (teaching and influence), I would highly recommend that even low-buffer churches be on the same page about core issues of belief and practice. It can be very confusing and unhelpful, for instance, for churchgoers to receive different

points of view on ethical questions that are crucial for someone's life. If leaders see a particular issue as a grey area rather than a "core" issue—pronoun use, for example—it might be okay for leaders to hold differing views. But if two leaders disagree on issues that they both see as essential, that disagreement will likely have a negative effective on the church's discipleship.

In sum, leaders of both high-buffer and low-buffer churches should work through several questions: 1) which roles are considered leadership positions and which are considered non-leadership positions of service, 2) the requirements for belief and practice on trans*-related issues, 3) whether the church sees these issues as core issues or more peripheral ones, and 4) whether leaders are required to agree on all these points.

Leadership Covenant

To ensure clarity, you might consider crafting a "Leadership Covenant" which outlines doctrinal and ethical expectations for leaders/influencers—including your expectations for their level of resonance with the church's view of trans*-related questions. Again, clarity up front is much better than ambiguity that leads to confusion down the road.

Expectations for positions of non-leadership service should also be clear. A high-buffer church might have very similar standards of resonance for those serving in non-leadership positions, while low-buffer churches might have more latitude. Whatever the case, it's always better to communicate these expectations up front and in writing—even if doing so feels pedantic and un-relational. This can be especially helpful if your church includes positions of service that are

open to non-members. All people in positions of service—leaders and non-leaders—should know what's expected from them in terms of ethics and doctrine.

Summary

High-buffer and low-buffer churches will approach membership, the sacraments, service, and leadership differently. It's important to think through how your church's ethical vision, including your vision of sexual ethics, impacts each of these areas. Clarity here is one important way church leaders can serve trans* individuals participating, or considering participation, in the life of your church community.

I want to remind us again that trans* experiences and identities are very broad and include a wide range of people, including some who identify with their biological sex. Some might not even be comfortable describing themselves as "trans*" for ideological or political reasons. Other trans* people might believe they were born in the wrong body and might have transitioned socially, hormonally, or surgically. As Mark Yarhouse says, "If you've met one trans* person, you've met...one trans* person." It's always important to remind ourselves of the vast diversity of trans* people and trans* experiences, especially when we're thinking through policies.

Concluding Thoughts

Jesus calls us to radical embrace and radical obedience. Those who follow him must strive to show generosity, hospitality, and sacrificial love to those outside the communion of faith, and to pursue obedience, trust, and faithfulness within the communion of faith. I want to wrap things up by offering three concluding thoughts.

First, my intention in this paper is not to police other people's behavior. My intention, rather, is to help Christian leaders consider what participation in the way of Jesus looks like for all of God's children, including his beloved trans* and gender dysphoric children. Leaders are called to navigate difficult questions alongside all people under our care. As leaders, we need to have biblical clarity on ethical questions related to divorce, remarriage, sexuality, generosity, racism, violence, nationalism, and a whole host of other things Christians are wrestling with (or should be wrestling with). It would be irresponsible and unloving to not care about the unique questions facing trans* people seeking to follow Jesus faithfully.

Second, trans* people aren't the only ones who wrestle with ethical issues related to gender identity and expression. Non-trans* people who reinforce gender stereotypes about masculinity and femininity need to be disciplined into a more biblical vision for what it means to be a man or woman. A church, for example, might believe that transitioning isn't the way of Christ; but it would be hypocritical for that same church to create a culture where cultural masculinity and femininity are upheld as moral goods and people who don't conform to these artificial standards are deemed ungodly. This is one of the blessings of the trans* conversation: It has forced us all to reconsider

unbiblical assumptions about what it means to be a man or a woman.

Third, giving clarity on what the way of Christ looks like for trans* people should come from a place of relational commitment. Those of us who don't identify as trans* should never lob ethical demands at people from a distance. Rather, we are inviting people into a family where no one walks alone. Ethical convictions should be tethered to relational commitment.

My friend Kyla transitioned (female to male) seven years ago. Three years ago, she met Jesus and decided to detransition back to female. It was a disruptive process—encountering Christ, having her world turned upside down, concluding that she wasn't really a man. Kyla decided to detransition back to female out of obedience to Christ. But she couldn't do it alone. A couple at her church knew what she was going through and how impossible it would be for her to walk this road in isolation. They invited Kyla to live with them in their home, so they could be the spiritual family she needed through it all. "I couldn't have done this without them," Kyla said. "I couldn't have gone through this without the family of Christ."

Non-trans* Christians who care about what discipleship looks like for trans* Christians should do so from a posture of nearness, not one of distance. Christians are not solitary individuals called to follow Jesus on our own and demand that others do the same. We're a community of radical misfits, called into a motley family filled with grace and truth where no one should walk alone.

Appendix A: Sample Leadership Covenant about Trans* Identities

I recommend that statements about trans* people be kept for internal use only and not posted on your public website. I offer the following sample statement not as something that every church must believe, but as an example of how I might word things according to my beliefs about trans* identities and experiences.

. . .

We welcome all people without distinction as honored guests of our church family. Whether our guests are Christians, atheists, Muslims, Buddhists, agnostic, straight, bisexual, trans*, married, divorced, Republican, or Democrat—all are welcomed, and all truly does mean all. We will not tolerate any behavior from one our family members that shames or dishonors our guests.

The members of our family strive to adhere to certain standards and beliefs. As it pertains to human nature, we believe that God created humanity as male and female (Gen. 1:27) and that our male and female identities pertain to our biological sex. We believe that God created our bodies as good and as essential aspects of our God-given identity as image bearers. We grieve with our guests or family members who experience various levels of incongruence with their bodies, whether it be poor body image, body dysmorphia, insecurity about some atypical feature in their body, or some level of gender dysphoria. We believe that all of these various experiences are unfortunate byproducts of being born into and living in a fallen world, where both nature and nurture—our upbringing and environment—often play a role in shaping negative views of our bodies.

Our church family welcomes all people with gender dysphoria as honored guests. And our church family places no ethical expectations on any of our guests, including those who might identify as transgender, nonbinary, gender fluid, gender queer, or another identity under the trans* umbrella. If *any* guest is not treated with the utmost dignity and respect, then our family has failed to embody the life and love of the Savior we're striving to emulate.

As with any family, ours has certain beliefs and standards of behavior that might differ from the beliefs of other families and will probably be considered countercultural to some guests. As it pertains to our bodies, we believe that our biological sex is an essential part of human identity, and that our biological sex determines whether we are a man or a woman. We agree with Paul that the body of a Christ-follower "is a temple of the Holy Spirit" and that "you are not your own" but "were bought with a price" and should "glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20). For some people, embracing their body as a gift from God and part of their human identity comes naturally and easily. For others, it can be a lifelong struggle. This is especially true for those who experience lifelong, and at times debilitating, gender dysphoria. As a family, we are committed to walking alongside any family member who struggles with gender dysphoria, helping them navigate this incongruence in a Christ-honoring way.

We live in a culture where various questions about trans* experiences and identities are widely discussed and widely disputed (and, we would argue, often widely misunderstood). In an effort

to be clear, here is what we believe about certain popular questions related to trans*-related experiences:

- *Human Ontology.* Ontology simply means “the nature of being.” We believe that God created us as sexed beings and that our biological sex determines whether we are men or women—or, for some intersex persons, both. (See our statement on intersex.) If someone’s gender identity (“one’s internal sense of self”) differs from their biological sex, we believe that God still sees them and identifies them according to their biological sex as male or female (or both, in some rare cases). We do not believe that someone can be scientifically or theologically “born in the wrong body,” even though this phrase might capture how some people feel about their bodies.
- *Pronouns.* Godly Christians dispute whether Christians should use the pronouns that trans* people choose for themselves. For instance, some say that calling a biological male “she” (or vice versa) is lying and affirming a person’s inaccurate view of themselves. Others, however, say that using a person’s pronouns can be an act of Christian hospitality and love.¹⁴ Having wrestled with this issue, our church leaders believe that using someone’s pronouns can be a hospitable act. For some people with gender dysphoria, hearing certain pronouns can trigger their dysphoria and ignite feelings of self-hatred, even leading to self-harm or suicidal thoughts. While one goal of discipleship for a person with gender dysphoria is learning to accept their biological sex, this can be a very slow and imperfect journey. We believe that using someone’s pronouns can be an act of

relational love that opens up relational opportunities for other believers to come alongside trans* people in their journey.

- *Identities.* People identify as trans* (including transgender, nonbinary, and other identities) for various reasons, and we do not feel that using these terms is intrinsically sinful. Our family does believe that our primary, ultimate, and all-controlling identity is that we are “in Christ.” That is, we are followers of Jesus, forgiven sinners deemed saints, adopted children of God who are lovers of neighbor and enemy alike. And yet, as diverse children of God, we all have various experiences in life, and sometimes terms can act as shorthand descriptors of our unique experiences. Consider this imperfect analogy: Going through a divorce can shape a person’s life in significant ways. If this person says, “I am divorced,” they don’t necessarily see their entire existence and identity as centered on their divorce. This label is just a shorthand descriptor of a significant aspect of their life. In a similar way, someone might say “I am trans*” and mean simply “I experience gender dysphoria” or “I don’t resonate with gender stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.” In short, we believe that someone could use a trans* identity label and still believe that Jesus reigns supreme in their life.
- *Transitioning.* Transitioning refers to varying degrees of identifying as a sex different from a person’s biological sex. There are three primary stages of transitioning—social, hormonal, and surgical—and each stage becomes progressively more invasive and irreversible. Since we believe that our God-given biological sex determines our identities as male, female, or both (in the case of some intersex persons), we therefore

believe that seeking to change biological sex, or seeking to identify with a biological sex that is not what God has given a person, does not resonate with the way of Christ. If someone experiences gender dysphoria, we do not believe that transitioning is the best ethical or psychological way to manage dysphoria. Our church is committed to seeking to help those who experience gender dysphoria follow Jesus in a way that leads to a flourishing life.

Since transitioning exists along a long and complex spectrum, it would be impossible—and unhelpful—for this statement to address every single aspect. For instance, social transitioning might involve changing your name from Stephanie (a female name) to Jamie (a gender-neutral name), or wearing T-shirts from the men's section at Target rather than the women's. We believe that trying to police every action along this spectrum would distract us from actual discipleship. Rather than having a long list of do's and don'ts—many of which would be subjective, arbitrary, and culturally shaped—we want to walk with every disciple in relationship, understand their heart, and seek to encourage them into Christlikeness as they encourage us.

We also do not have a one-size-fits-all approach for advising someone who has already transitioned and later converts to Christianity and desires to join our church family. For someone who has only socially transitioned, realigning with their biological sex might be relatively simple. But for someone who has surgically transitioned, transitioning back to their biological sex might not be possible. As a church, we want to walk with each individual trans* convert

to help them flourish as a disciple of Christ, discerning whether Christ wants them to take steps to detransition or to “remain as you are” (1 Cor. 7).

Our church leaders are constantly studying, learning, and dialoguing with trans* people. We are willing to change our beliefs on trans*-related issues if we are compelled to do so through further study of Scripture (special revelation) and what God has revealed to us about human nature through science (general revelation). We are, as the saying goes, “always reforming”—always taking our beliefs back to the text of Scripture to see if those beliefs need to be changed. We are passionate about following the will of our Creator as revealed through the text of Scripture, which includes loving people as Jesus did—especially the poor, the outcast, and those who have been marginalized by religion. In short, we seek to embody both the truth and the grace of Jesus.

Notes

1 For a thorough discussion of these percentages, see Paul Rhodes Eddy, “Reflections on the Debate Concerning the Desistance Rate among Young People with Gender Dysphoria” (*The Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender*, 2019), available at https://www.centerforfaith.com/resources?field_product_category_tid=10

2 This section comes from pages 23-25 of my book *Embodied*.

3 This, of course, is a debated point. For a thorough discussion, see *Embodied*, chap. 5.

4 This section is taken from *Embodied*, 199-200.

5 See *Embodied*, 199-212. One especially complicated situation arises when young teens request that their parents address them by a new name and pronouns. I’ve talked to several different parents, psychologists, counselors, trans* and formerly trans*-identified people about this kind of situation. Naturally, I received a range of responses about what parents should do. Some say that parents should always use the name and pronouns their child chooses. Others disagree; even some young adults who *were* that kid have said that they wish their parents had denied their request. In either case, the primary thing parents need to do is love, listen to, and walk with their kids. Beyond this, I advise parents to consider this question on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the nature of their relationship with their child and the child’s own experiences.

6 Both of these quotes are from chapter 2 of *Embodied*.

7 See *Embodied*, 183-192.

8 See *Embodied*, 167-172.

9 As stated earlier, 61-88% of kids with gender dysphoria end up growing out of their dysphoria after puberty. There also seems to be a growing number (though there’s no clear

percentages based on studies yet) of people, especially females, detransitioning—and therefore no longer identifying as trans*.

10 The following four points are taken from *Embodied*, 194-197.

11 The phrase “remain as you are” comes from Paul’s discussion in 1 Corinthians 7:20-24, where he instructs the Corinthian believers to remain in the circumstances they were in when they became believers. These circumstances include circumcised/uncircumcised, married/unmarried, and slave/free. This last set of circumstances, of course, raises all kinds of questions about what Paul thinks of slavery. He goes on to say, “Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so” (1 Cor. 7:21). If you can gain your freedom, says Paul, then do it. But if not? In that case, “Don’t let it trouble you.” Slavery in the Greco-Roman world was quite different on many levels than, say, slavery in the antebellum American South. Mapping this passage onto more modern forms of slavery would be irresponsible. And yet, slavery still indicates ownership of one human by another, a circumstance that Paul himself elsewhere describes as falling short of God’s ideal (1 Cor. 7:23; Philemon). The point is: sometimes Christians can “remain as they are,” even if “as they are” might not be ideal. I can see a valid argument, then, for concluding that people are not always ethically obligated to change their current situation, even if that situation is less than ideal or is not reflective of God’s design.

12 The following section is drawn from Joshua Ryan Butler, “Guidance for Churches on Membership, Baptism, Communion, Leadership, and Service for Gay and Lesbian People” (*The Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender*, 2017), available at https://www.centerforfaith.com/resources?field_product_category_tid=1

13 “Guidance for Churches on Membership, Baptism, Communion, Leadership, and Service for Gay and Lesbian

People" (*The Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender*, 2017), available at https://www.centerforfaith.com/resources?field_product_category_tid=1

14 For a thorough discussion of the pronoun debate, see *Embodied*, 199-212.

About the Author

Our collaboration is a growing team of Christian leaders, pastors, scholars, and LGBT+ persons to serve as advisors, writers, speakers, researchers, and board members. Learn more about our collaborative team at www.centerforfaith.com/leadership.



Dr. Preston Sprinkle
President
The Center for Faith,
Sexuality, & Gender

Preston is a biblical scholar, an international speaker, and a New York Times bestselling author who has written numerous books including *Embodied: Transgender Identities, The Church, and What the Bible Has to Say* (David C. Cook), *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (Zondervan) and *Living in a Gray World: A Christian Teen's Guide to Homosexuality* (Zondervan). He also served as the general editor for *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church* (Zondervan). Preston has given talks to thousands of people worldwide on the topic of faith, sexuality and gender. He and his wife, Chris, and their four children live in Boise, Idaho. Learn more about Preston on his website: prestonsprinkle.com.

THE CENTER FOR
FAITH, SEXUALITY & GENDER

The Center for Faith, Sexuality & Gender is a collaboration of Christian pastors, leaders and theologians who aspire to be the Church's most trusted source of theologically sound teaching and practical guidance on questions related to sexuality and gender.

Download more resources at:

WWW.CENTERFORFAITH.COM