

## A POSITION PAPER ON GENDER

This paper represents the first word, not the last word, in this ongoing conversation about gender. This is no mere intellectual debate - it's about real people and their real lives. We are interested only in trying to love and serve people and families in a way that's helpful, thoughtful, loving and Biblically faithful. We also are attempting to do this with humility, understanding that navigating this conversation is enormously complex. We hope to be a people who move toward understanding, compassion and loving friendship toward all people, including those who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community. We believe faithfulness to the way of Jesus Christ - which is the way of love - demands it.

WestGate Church recognizes that conversations regarding human sexuality are complex and multi-layered. Again, conversations are not about issues to fight over or problems to solve; they are primarily about a people to love and becoming a people of love together. In an age of confusion and complexity, we believe that offering our best understanding of the Biblical vision for gender is an expression of love through clarity with compassion.

## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TELL US ABOUT GENDER?

Our best understanding of Scripture reveals several key realities.

**ALL HUMANS HAVE INVIOABLE WORTH + DIGNITY:** The Creation account in Genesis 1:26-28 says that in the entire created realm, only humans have the “image of God.” Human beings have inherent, God-given value – independent of their utility or function.

**HUMANS HAVE A GOD-GIVEN PURPOSE:** The word translated into “image of God” (Hebrew: *tselem*) in the ancient world was a localized, visible, corporeal representation of a divine being. YHWH's *tselem* are humans. Humans are to embody and express the essence of YHWH, particularly in our functions to “rule” (Hebrew: *radah*) and “subdue” (Hebrew: *kabash*) the world.

### **HUMAN PERSONS ARE EMBODIED SOULS (OR ENSOULED BODIES, IF YOU PREFER)**

Genesis 2:7 shows that humankind is comprised of a body (dust, the material matter of this world) PLUS spirit (the very breath of God). Dust + Breath = Living Being (A Person). Human persons are not spirits that have a body, but rather a person is a spirit/body operating in interacting duality.

**HUMAN BODIES ARE “SEXED” - MEANING THEY ARE MALE OR FEMALE** In the Creation poem of Genesis 1-2, humanity's dual pieces - males and females - are not the only such pair introduced. There are other pairs, a constellation of patterns, which show a specific and intentional structure of Creation, including land/sea, heavens/earth, and night/day. Man and woman join these complementary pairs of creation. Together, male and female are a microcosm of the world that surrounds us.

## **THE GOD-DESIGNED BIOLOGICAL REALITIES OF MALE/FEMALE ALLOW FOR PROCREATIVE**

**POTENTIAL<sup>1</sup>:** Although the interdependence of men and women is visible in *many* areas and realities of human life, one concrete example of the necessity of a male/female human partnership is found biologically. Males and females cannot “multiply” alone.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, a “**woman**” is the kind of human whose body is organized around the potential to generate new life within herself and a “**man**” is the kind of human whose body is organized around the potential to generate new life in another.

**HUMAN BODIES ARE SACRED.** Eve is said to have been taken from the *tsela* of Adam. The word *tsela* (*English word: rib*) is used in more than forty other passages in the Old Testament, and in almost every other usage, *tsela* refers to the **side** of a sacred piece of architecture like the tabernacle or the temple.<sup>3</sup> Adam was cut in two, as it were, and YHWH made Eve from the other side. Adam’s body, therefore (and now Eve’s) is compared to a sacred piece of architecture that radiates God’s presence in the world.

## **MALE / FEMALE ARE CREATED REALITIES AND ARE ESSENTIAL PARTS OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BEAR**

**“THE IMAGE OF GOD”** The poetic structure of Genesis 1:27 correlates “male and female” with the previous references to “the image of God” and “His own image.” Humanity’s sex differences are part or one aspect of what it means to bear God’s image. God could have created a sexless humankind to reflect his image, but He chose to create humans as sexed beings: female and male.

## **OUR SEXED, SOUL-EMBODIED BODIES ARE AN ESSENTIAL PART OF OUR PERSONHOOD**

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul refers to the “body” (Greek word: *soma*) roughly eight times and each time, correlates “body” with unique human “personhood.” In Romans 12:1, Paul commands believers to “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.” Just a few chapters earlier, Paul writes, “offer yourselves to God” (Romans 6:13, 16). For Paul, offering “your bodies” and offering “yourselves” means the same thing, semantically. This idea is decidedly NOT Greek (whose platonic and gnostic thinkers argued that the material world was inferior to the spiritual realm). The Christian idea that a biological human body could be the dwelling place of God’s spirit (ie “your body is a temple”) is demonstrated in baptism, confirmed in discipleship, proved most decisively in Jesus’s incarnate flesh, and anticipated in the resurrection of the dead. Our sexed bodies are sacred, and they are an essential part of the identity that God has assigned to us.

## **CONCLUSION**

The conversation around gender is one of the watershed issues of our day. Making sense of our gendered bodies is part of what it means to be human. As Christians, we go to the Bible and the

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<sup>1</sup> We recognize that many are unable to have children for a number of reasons. A childless life is not second-class life nor does a lack of children make any person a second-class citizen in God’s kingdom.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:22,28 gives the command to humans to “be fruitful and multiply.” In Genesis 2:18 and 2:20, the term “suitable helper” (Hebrew: *ezer*) means “one who does what we cannot do for ourselves.” This is a word that’s frequently used throughout the Old Testament about YHWH Himself.

<sup>3</sup> See John H. Walton: *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), pages 77-81.

community of God's people in His church as we rely on the in-dwelling, illuminating help of the Holy Spirit to guide us.

## **ADDENDUM #1**

### **SO WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN?<sup>4</sup>**

In light of these theological considerations, we think there are several pastoral implications for how we live this out. If wisdom is knowledge correctly applied, then we must not assume a “one size fits all” strategy. To our best understanding, there are three categories of people we would like to address.

#### **TO THE SUFFERING**

There are those in our community, our city and our world who are suffering from acute medical and/or psychological issues surrounding their sex or gender. This includes gender dysphoria<sup>5</sup> and the medical condition labeled “intersex” which delineates a statistically rare situation<sup>6</sup> in which someone is born with atypical features in their sexual anatomy, chromosomes, or secondary sex characteristics. Such persons are not genetic mistakes, but beautiful persons created in God’s image and worthy of respect, value, and admiration. We must be careful not to minimize the unique challenges that a person with one of these conditions might experience. Instead, we have the chance to embody and offer the love and life of Jesus to people who (for whatever reason) might feel “othered” by those in society (both intentionally or unintentionally).

We think a faithful posture of relational hospitality is to communicate, in word and deed, the following things:

- I love you.
- God loves you.
- Tell me what it’s like to be you.
- Let’s walk, together, toward Jesus.

#### **TO THE CONFUSED**

The word “confused” here is not meant to be pejorative in any way. Navigating what it means to have a body, and what it means to be “male” or “female” is a difficult thing for anyone, especially for young people going through the social mine-field of puberty and adolescence.

We think part of the confusion comes in how we, as a culture, talk about this issue. As we noted below in the definitions appendix, the term “sex” means one’s bodily, biological reality, while the term “gender” refers to how one gives social expression to that reality. A great deal of the confusion in our culture can be found in conflating the two terms. One’s biological sex (sex) does not change and is not altered simply by one’s expression of what it means to be a man or a woman (gender). Gender

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from the work of Joshua Ryan Butler

<sup>5</sup> According to the National Institute of Health, gender dysphoria is defined as persistent distress stemming from the incongruence between one’s assigned sex at birth and gender identity.

<sup>6</sup> Although this condition is rare (roughly 0.05-0.02 percent of live births) and the vast majority of people who have an intersex condition are unambiguously male or female, this does present real challenges for both those born with these congenital conditions and for their families.

expression differs from culture to culture, and from time period to time period.<sup>7</sup> But our modern culture, in seeking to divorce “cultural expectations and expressions” from “gender” has instead divorced the “individual self” from everything, including culture and even biological realities. Gender expression may be compared to the spectrum of visible light: biological sex can not.

In light of this, we believe that Jesus’ response (and therefore our mandate) is to respond with clarity. We think this means helping people (especially young people) see that the Bible allows for a broad range of gender expressions within a sexual binary. This means that there are many different ways of being male or female. It’s possible, for instance, that a biological female could act in ways that appear to be masculine through a cultural lens, but this does not necessarily mean that she’s presenting as a male—though some might accuse her of such. In short, yes, the Bible acknowledges that humans are male and female and expects humans to live in congruence with their embodied sexed identity...but the Bible gives few specific guidelines about what this will look like. God’s expectations for gender expression seem to be quite flexible. And most modern assumptions and stereotypes about what it means to be a man or woman are not endorsed or prescribed by the Bible.

So to those seeking to navigate the complexities of expressing the social realities of one’s sex, we think a faithful posture of relational hospitality is to communicate, in word and deed, the following things:

- I love you.
- God loves you.
- Tell me what it’s like to be you.
- Let’s walk, together, toward Jesus.

## **TO THE REVOLUTIONARIES**

There are some who believe that doing away with gender entirely will liberate humanity. Carl Trueman, in his book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, says that this movement is a result of the modern preoccupation with and deification of the self as the lone authoritative guide. The rise of the modern self means that all other external forms of authority are shuttled. In this philosophy, the truest guide is the self and its desires, and “freedom” is removing all impediments to the desires of the self.

In light of this, we believe that Jesus’ response (and therefore our mandate) is to respond with loving confrontation, with compassion and empathy. We believe that human flourishing is not found in building a perfect society through human means, but in surrendering to and following King Jesus, learning and living the ways of His Kingdom, as upside down as they may seem in light of current cultural tides.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, in some Polynesian cultures, it’s common for men to wear skirt-like attire (called lavalavas), though in most Western countries, only women are expected to wear skirts. This does not mean that Polynesian men are suddenly female because they wear skirts.

## **ADDENDUM #2**

### **PASTORAL CONSIDERATIONS**

In short, our viewpoint is that the modern culture's attempt to redefine "gender" to mean "one's internal sense of self regardless of one's biological sex" is questionable at best. At the very least, it assumes that one's "internal sense of self" is a reliable guide for determining an ontological reality.

Given the teaching of the Bible on bodies and gender, we believe that every male or female's sex is assigned biologically at birth and is not determined by individuals for themselves. Every human person has a multitude of ways to represent the image of God through their work and creativity on earth. The idea of male or female "gender" as personality traits or preferences has historically been culturally defined, and has not always represented the amount of freedom that each gender has been given to honor their God-given gifts and design.<sup>8</sup>

Based upon our best understanding of Scripture, we also contend that it is never God's intention that someone would try to change their biological sex, for a few reasons. First, follow-up with people who have pursued SRS/HRT has shown that it's not a guaranteed solution in treating gender dysphoria and can lead to other mental and physical problems. It also seems to violate the principle of non-maleficence (first, do no harm), which is one of the principal precepts of bioethics and is a fundamental medical principle throughout the world. Additionally, fully changing one's biological sex is currently impossible, since chromosomes are a significant part of determining sex and we currently cannot change our chromosomes.

For those who undergo these procedures, we are committed to serving, loving, and walking with you toward Jesus, together.

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<sup>8</sup> Many of the ideas in addendum 2 are thanks to Preston Sprinkle and the *Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender*, especially their pastoral paper on transgender identities.

## **GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED IN THIS PAPER**

*For the sake of clarity, we want to define key terms and words that are of importance and will be used frequently in this paper.*

**Transgender** is an umbrella term for the various ways in which some people experience incongruence between their biological sex and their gender identity. In layperson's terms, a transgender person often feels like they're trapped in the wrong body.

**Gender Dysphoria** is a fairly new term used by psychologists to describe the level of distress that often comes with the incongruence one might experience between their biological sex and their internal sense of who they are (e.g. their gender identity).

**Intersex** is a term used to describe someone who is born with some atypical features in their sexual anatomy and/or sex chromosomes.

**Non-binary gender identities** are identities other than male or female. These identities include gender-queer, gender-fluid, pangender, and gender nonconforming. These terms are used by people who don't identify as exclusively male or female, or who reject a gender binary altogether.

**Sex** simply refers to one's biological sex, which is constituted by one's system of reproduction, chromosomes (men have a Y chromosome while women do not), genitalia, and endocrine systems (i.e. hormones) which affect secondary sex characteristics such as body hair, bone structure, and muscle density.

**Gender** is a word that used to be used synonymously or interchangeably with the word "sex." Some people still use them synonymously today, but many people typically use gender to describe one (or all) of the following:

- (1) A person's internal sense of self
- (2) How one expresses oneself (clothing, mannerisms, interests, etc.), or
- (3) cultural expectations for what it means to be a man or a woman.

We will use the term "gender" in a way that resonates most with the latter two; in short: "Sex is a bodily, biological reality, and *gender* is how we give social expression to that reality.

**For additional resources:**

[westgatechurch.org/wonderfully-made](https://westgatechurch.org/wonderfully-made)