



transforming

The Bible & the Lives
of Transgender Christians

Austen Hartke

Foreword by Matthew Vines,
author of *God and the Gay Christian*

“What a powerful read! Clear, compelling, and profoundly moving, this book should be on the shelf of every pastor, every parent, and every Christian of good conscience who wants to engage the conversation around gender and sexuality with integrity. With the patience of a teacher and the humility of a fellow traveler, Austen Hartke carefully unpacks the terminology, sociological studies, and biblical and theological perspectives that most impact transgender Christians, and he combines them with compelling personal stories—including his own—to point us toward truth. It’s rare to find a book that manages to be this intellectually rigorous and this readable at the same time. But then, Austen Hartke is a rare talent, one we are so blessed to call part of the body of Christ. I’ll be recommending this book to friends and readers for years to come.”

—Rachel Held Evans, author of
Searching for Sunday and *Inspired*

“Far too often in the conversations at the intersections of LGBT+ identity and Christian faith, the trans community has been ignored. Now, with stunning clarity, scholarly insight, and extraordinary vulnerability, Austen Hartke explores trans identity through the lens of Scripture in a poignant and accessible way that challenges, convicts, and inspires everyone to lean more fully into their God-created identity. This resource challenges false narratives about gender so often promoted in nonaffirming spaces and offers a richly biblical path forward in our understanding and embrace of trans individuals into the life of the church. *Transforming* is truly a game changer and one of the most important theological books to have been written in recent memory.”

—Brandan Robertson, Lead Pastor, Missiongathering
Christian Church, author and editor, *Our Witness:
The Unheard Stories of LGBT+ Christians*

“Austen Hartke brings such compassion, grace, and love to his ministry and advocacy. In this timely book, he gives the church a wonderful gift by amplifying the diverse voices of transgender Christians. He also issues an important, much-needed invitation, calling us all to faithful reexamination of what Scripture has to say about identity, gender, and community.”

—Jeff Chu, author of *Does Jesus Really Love Me? A Gay Christian's Pilgrimage in Search of God in America*

“Austen Hartke has become a major interpreter of transgender Christian reality. This book will be recognized as a very important early contribution to an essential conversation, with so much at stake for the precious, vulnerable people whose well-being should be at the center of Christian concern.”

—David P. Gushee, author of *Still Christian* and *A Letter to My Anxious Christian Friends*

“The authentic, intimate stories of transgender Christians in this book unveil an image of the divine that is not monolithic but rather wonderfully multifaceted. By highlighting these stories as an important part of the trajectory of Christianity, *Transforming* reveals a truth about the body of Christ: that it is incomplete without the inclusion of God's transgender children. This is a seminal book that must be read by anyone seeking to understand what it really means to be the church.”

—David and Constantino Khalaf, Christian bloggers, coeditors, and authors of *Modern Kinship* (forthcoming from Westminster John Knox Press)

“For people who are trans or nonbinary people, the Bible can sometimes feel like a weapon that is used against us. At the same time, for those of us who are Christians, the Bible is utterly important to our faith. So what's a trans Christian, or their friends and allies, to do? Austen Hartke's book answers that question. Hartke combines careful biblical exegesis with helpful education around gender and gender identity, all wrapped in a conversational tone and packed with practical advice. This book will be a must-read for trans Christians, pastors, lay leaders, parents, and all who believe in God's creative and transforming love.”

—Emily C. Heath, Senior Pastor, Congregational Church (UCC), Exeter, New Hampshire

“Hartke's *Transforming* is an important work of understanding, compassion, and storytelling. Hartke not only possesses great theological and biblical knowledge but has a deeply compassionate and conversational approach to a topic that is hard for many in the church. Not only will trans Christians find their own

struggles reflected in these pages, but parents, allies, and people wishing to understand and know God’s transformative story for *all* God’s people will find a safe home in this book.”

—Dianna Anderson, author of *Damaged Goods: New Perspectives on Christian Purity and Problematic: How Toxic Callout Culture Is Destroying Feminism*

“I am encouraged by brave individuals who have challenged old, harmful interpretations of Scripture in favor of a more loving and inclusive Christianity that more fully reflects our Jesus. Through story and Scripture, Hartke does just that, sharing the pain of exclusion and the joy of following God to becoming more fully himself. This is an important read for any Christian who believes in celebrating the diversity of creation and the value of all people.”

—Rachel Murr, author of *Unnatural: Spiritual Resiliency in Queer Christian Women*

“In *Transforming*, Austen Hartke makes a vital contribution to theologies both queer and Christian. This book will be invaluable to anyone seeking to understand trans lives and show respect to trans people. But Hartke is up to something more, something important: Hartke wants dialogue to take place among Christians, and he wants trans voices to be recognized as authoritative in that conversation. Hartke manages to engage evangelical perspectives respectfully, without sinking into apologetics. The trans voices in this book speak boldly, engaging Christian tradition and Scripture with refreshing insight. On its face, *Transforming* invites readers to perceive the marvel of trans identity; but it is also a powerful call to perceive anew what is surprising and life-giving in an authentic read of Christian faith.”

—Elizabeth M. Edman, author of *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know about Life and Love and How It Can Revitalize Christianity*

“There has been need for a book by a young transgender Christian. Seminary-trained transgender man Austen Hartke is the right person to answer the call and fill the need. Hartke begins his book with basic terminology and expands to scriptural support for transgender persons not just being in the church, hiding unnamed in the back row, but serving in openness and authenticity. Whether you

do not know any or know many transgender people of faith, you'll learn from Hartke's accessible, humble, and informative writing."

—Kathy Baldock, Executive Director,
Canyonwalker Connections, Reno, Nevada

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The Bible and the Lives
of Transgender Christians

Austen Hartke

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*For every trans Christian who feels alone;
for every parent caught between a rock and a hard place;
for every church and every ministry professional
committed to holding the door open—
this book is for you.*

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Excerpt from *UnClobber*, by Colby Martin

Foreword

This book is a gift to the church, and it couldn't come at a more urgent time.

As more transgender people have come out in recent years, many cisgender people like me have begun to recognize the daunting scale of discrimination and hostility that trans people have to face every day. It's not overstating the matter to say that our society's mistreatment of transgender people is an ongoing humanitarian crisis.

According to the landmark National Transgender Discrimination Survey published in 2014, in the United States, 41 percent of transgender adults have attempted suicide. Just think about that: forty-one percent. (The overall rate for the general population is 1.6 percent.) But as horrifying as that statistic is, it's not surprising in light of these other numbers: 90 percent of transgender people have experienced harassment or discrimination at work, 57 percent have experienced significant family rejection, 26 percent have been fired for who they are, and 19 percent have experienced homelessness because of their gender identity. In recent years, too, the number of transgender people who have been murdered has gone up, and transgender women of color are usually the victims of these widely ignored attacks.

Where has the church been amidst this barrage of harassment, discrimination, and violence against transgender and gender-nonconforming people? All too often, the church has been part of the problem. For many transgender people, some of the most painful rejection they've experienced has been in church. After being mocked and bullied in school, they've been told by their pastors on Sunday that who they are at a fundamental level is a disgrace to God. Unless they can change something that cannot be changed, transgender people are frequently told that there is no place for them among God's people, and a few verses from Scripture are casually deployed as tools of exclusion by those who've barely gotten to know the people they're excluding.

In the face of that kind of hostility, it would be perfectly defensible for transgender people to want nothing to do with Christianity—and indeed, if Jesus

were here, I think he'd be turning over tables to protest the church's inhumane treatment of them. But that only makes the faith and testimonies of transgender Christians all the more powerful. I've met faithful transgender Christians all over the world, from Mississippi to Minnesota and as far away as Budapest. I've been inspired by their stories, and I've grown and changed as a result of them. I've also learned a great deal about theology and biblical interpretation from transgender Christians, and in this book you'll get to learn from one of the best teachers I know.

Austen Hartke is an ideal person to write this profoundly important book. I first got to know Austen a few years back through his wonderful YouTube series "Transgender and Christian," where he breaks down theological issues related to gender identity with grace, warmth, and expert skill. A graduate of Luther Seminary's Master of Arts program in Old Testament/Hebrew Bible Studies and the winner of the 2014 John Milton Prize in Old Testament Writing from Luther Seminary, Austen has a keen theological mind and an infectious love for Scripture. He's taught at The Reformation Project's conferences, and I've seen firsthand how his work has helped countless transgender people reconcile their faith and their gender identity.

But as powerful as Austen's own story is, he isn't just interested in letting you learn more about him. Austen has a huge heart for other transgender people, and in this book he shares with you the stories of other extraordinary transgender Christians, like the Reverend M Barclay, a nonbinary believer, and Nicole Garcia, a trans Latina minister. Austen is passionate about amplifying the voices of trans people of color, trans women, nonbinary people, and others who experience multiple layers of marginalization in the church. That commitment shapes and enriches every page of his book.

I have a story to share about Austen that will show you some of his character and heart for others. When I was in Budapest recently, I spent an evening with about twenty LGBTQ Christians and allies. One young man who came that night had recently come out as transgender. He told me he'd found Austen's work online and that it had helped him in his journey as a transgender Christian. But even more than that, Austen had actually struck up a friendship with this man, answering his messages and going out of his way to provide encouragement and support to him from halfway across the world. This trans Christian expressed his amazement to me that Austen, an American with a growing platform and reputation, would take the time to befriend and support someone who was

coming out as far away as Hungary. I was thrilled for him, but not surprised. That's just who Austen is.

It's out of that same servant's heart that Austen wrote this book. There is a desperate need for more pastoral and theological resources to help transgender and gender-nonconforming Christians, and through this book Austen is taking a significant step toward filling that need. He easily could have walked away from the church. He could have scorned those who haven't accepted him for who he is. But he didn't. He stayed out of his love for the church, and his writing and teaching are changing lives around the world. This book will only increase his impact, and it will be the first resource I recommend for transgender Christians and those seeking to love—and learn from—transgender and gender-nonconforming people in the church.

So pull up a chair and get started. This is a conversation that cannot wait, and Austen is the best of guides.

Matthew Vines
Founder and executive director of The Reformation Project,
and author of *God and the Gay Christian:
The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships*
July 2, 2017

Introduction

Did God Make a Mistake?

Whenever I go to speak with Christians who are unfamiliar with transgender folks, it seems as if we spend the first few minutes dancing around the question they really want to ask. Not “Have you had the surgery?” or “What’s your real name?” (Though I’ve heard those too, and I always take a moment to remind people that those questions aren’t appropriate or a good way to start a conversation.) No, the question I get most often sounds more like this: “So, if God made you female, but you identify as male, does that mean that you think God made a mistake?”

I asked myself that same question for a long time before coming out as transgender. As a teenager I believed strongly in the idea that everything happens for a reason, and if that was true, then there must have been a reason God had made me with a body that was designated female when I was born. Even though I’d known for most of my life that I didn’t feel like a girl, I did my best to ignore that fact and push it down deep where I didn’t have to think about it. The biggest hurdle I faced in addressing my gender identity was that it seemed like saying God was wrong.

So imagine my relief when I started coming across Scripture passages that appeared to have something to say about gender identity and the way God made the world! In seminary I read the Bible cover to cover and spent hours in the library poring over books about creation narratives, clothing in the ancient world, and the meaning of the incarnation. I learned from Job that sometimes things happen in the world that don’t make much sense to us human beings. I

learned from Abraham what it's like to have your name changed. I learned from the apostle Philip that sometimes you have to say yes to God even when you have no idea what God is doing. And of course I learned from Jesus, who after his resurrection chose to show his body to the disciples—a body that was scarred and transformed, and yet still his own.

The more I learned, the more I felt compelled to open up myself to the world. I wanted to take out the parts of myself that I'd packed away out of sight, and to let them breathe in the sunshine. It almost felt as if my heart was trying to escape my chest, pulling in the same sort of way it had when I began considering a seminary education. I decided to follow that call, and when I started talking with other transgender people and describing my experiences, I heard them speaking parts of my own story back to me. When I discovered that there were other transgender Christians (who knew?!), I felt as if I'd stumbled across buried treasure.

Before long, I was finding my own answer to that original question: “Did God make a mistake?” Personally, my answer is no. I don't believe God made a mistake in creating me just as I am. God created me with a body that was designated female when I was born—a body that I struggled to connect with for the first twenty-six years of my life and that I now finally feel at home in—but God also created me with a capacity for change and with a mind that identifies as male. I believe God made all of me—gender identity included—and intended for me to be a transgender person who sees the world through a different lens. I don't think God made a mistake. I think God made me transgender on purpose.

After I graduated from seminary I wasn't sure what to do next. I really wanted to keep talking with other trans Christians and to keep exploring the Scripture passages that had given me so much life! I began making videos about gender-related theological topics and posting them on YouTube, and before long people started leaving comments. Some were wonderful, and some were mean-spirited, but the ones that got to me the most came from transgender teenagers and young people who had desperate questions. Questions like, “Does God still love me if I'm trans?” and “My pastor says I'm going to hell. What do I do?” I did my best to point toward helpful resources (many of which you'll find in the Further Reading section in the back of this book), but in the end I couldn't find a written, accessible place where all kinds of different trans-affirming theologies came together. I wanted a book written by transgender people and for transgender people and the faith communities that care about them.

That's why I began talking with friends of mine who also identified as transgender Christians, asking them if they'd be willing to share some of the things they've learned. I certainly don't have all the answers! As a white, bisexual, transgender man, I have no idea what it's like to navigate Christian faith as a person of color, or as a nonbinary person, or as a trans woman. I wanted to include some stories that end happily—and some others that don't end on such an upbeat note. Trans Christians face incredible obstacles in churches around the world. While some of us find ways to make it back into affirming communities with a faith that's still strong, not all of us have found that fountain of healing yet.

I'm so thankful to the people who agreed to sit down and gift me with their time and their knowledge, as this project was coming together. When I talked with the people you're about to meet in these pages, I always ended each interview with the same big question: "Do you think God made a mistake?" Strangely enough, even though we're all very different, we seem to agree on this subject.

Here are a few of their answers:

If there's a mistake at all, it's that we've created this understanding of gender that is so deeply limiting of God's creation. That's the mistake. We've always been diverse people. We've always recognized that using tools, for lack of a better word, to best support our bodies is a good thing. Certainly those of us who change our bodies physically because of our gender identity are not the first people in the world who have needed assistance to be our best selves.

—M

God created us with the ability to also be creators, and some of those creators created surgical procedures and medical procedures and concepts and ideologies and systems and communities that do wonderful things! If we aren't taking part in that creative process, then we're going against our very created nature.

—Lawrence

God doesn't make mistakes; she just makes things easier or a bit more difficult to find. Transitioning doesn't mean that God made a mistake, just that I need to work a bit harder to find the fullness of life God has for me.

—River

I think that God knit me together in my mother's womb, but has also been knitting me together every day since. I think God knit together my body and my identity. I'm not just a woman. I'm not just a man. I'm transgender. That's what God intended.

—Asher

I can't wait for you to read more about each of these wonderful people in the coming chapters, and to get a glimpse inside their faith and their lives. One quick note before we get going: In this book I use the word "queer" as a synonym for people with LGBTQ+ identities. Not every gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender person uses this word to describe themselves, because even though it's in the process of being reclaimed by LGBTQ+ activists, historically it has been used as a slur. In the interviews in this book I use the word "queer" only to describe someone who has already affirmed that they use this word for themselves. If you are unsure whether it's right to use a word to describe a person's identity, it's always best to ask first!

So, let's wade a little deeper into these theological waters. Christians these days have questions about what the Bible has to say regarding clothing, changing bodies, new names, and the way God created human beings to exist in this world. I am thankful that trans Christians, who have been living and studying these questions for years, have come up with some pretty fascinating answers! Let's begin by asking ourselves why theology for and about transgender people is important.

PART ONE

Standing on the Edge

“Do they even let ... people like you ...in?”

This was the first thing my sister Madelyn asked when I told her that I was applying to seminary. Of course, she didn't mean it in a derogatory way—she was and continues to be one of the most supportive people in my life—but she was curious and concerned. In 2011, when I submitted my application to a degree program in youth ministry, I had not yet come to grips with my gender identity. I had been open about my bisexuality for about seven years, though, and I didn't relish the idea of having to get back into the closet.

This meant that when I started considering a seminary program, my discernment process didn't begin with “Is God leading me toward ministry?” or even “Would this degree give me a leg up in my career?” No, when I arrived on campus for visit days, I was seeking some more basic answers. For instance, if I brought my whole self to the study of Scripture and the building up of the church, would I be welcomed? If I opened myself to honest and authentic communion with others in the classroom and in the sanctuary, could I count on being physically safe?

Most Christians in the United States today don't have to choose between being open about their relationships or being excommunicated. Most Christians don't have to risk being assaulted on their way to services for wearing their favorite dress, only to arrive and hear a sermon condemning them to eternal punishment. But some do.

That is why, to this day, I feel just a little bit nervous when I walk into any unfamiliar church building. It's a response reinforced by years of necessary self-defense, which too many LGBTQ+ Christians have to cultivate. The landmark 2013 Pew Research Center Survey of LGBT Americans tells us that 29 percent

of LGBT-identified folks have been made to feel unwelcome in religious spaces.¹ When we consider the fact that the Williams Institute estimated the number of LGBTQ+ Americans to be about nine million in 2011,² this means that roughly two and a half million people have been treated poorly by those who share their faith, simply because of their sexuality or gender identity.

That negative treatment—whether it manifests itself as hostile stares, a direct order to leave, or physical violence—doesn't exist in a vacuum. As Christianity continues to be the dominant religious force behind much of American culture, people outside church walls have begun to express frustration with the faith's attitude toward LGBTQ+ people. A 2014 study revealed that 70 percent of millennials and 58 percent of Americans overall now believe that religious groups are alienating people by being too judgmental about LGBTQ+ issues like same-sex marriage.³ One-quarter of the people who were raised in religious families, but have left their tradition, admit that negative treatment or teachings about LGBTQ+ people was a factor in their decision to leave. With organized Christianity in America already facing a steady decline,⁴ we might well ask how the church could possibly afford to push anyone out, especially persons who desperately seek to be recognized and accepted as part of the faith.

And that's the strangest part about these recent studies: despite Christianity's reputation for anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment, half of queer-identified adults claim a religious affiliation, and 17 percent consider their faith very important in their lives.⁵ What's more, these percentages appear to be getting larger every year.⁶

How does it feel to be caught in the crosshairs between your faith and your identity, which has been declared part of “the culture wars”? For some LGBTQ+ Christians, it's a refining fire that brings about an even greater passion for mercy, justice, and a relationship with God. Gay and lesbian Christians like Matthew Vines and Rachel Murr have even written about their experiences and their journey to a greater understanding of the “clobber passages” related to sexuality. In recent years, cultural and political issues like same-sex marriage have brought lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues into the cultural limelight.

Transgender issues and identities, however, have been largely ignored during this same time period, both within society at large and more obviously within Christian circles. The writers at *Christianity Today*, an evangelical magazine, expressed low-level apprehensions about trans issues beginning in 2008, but it wasn't until 2012 that the T in LGBT found its first big Christian news headline. A Girl Scout troop in Colorado allowed a young transgender woman to join; this prompted swift retribution, in the form of a cookie boycott by some Christians.

In 2013, Dr. Heath Adam Ackley, a professor at the evangelical Azusa Pacific University, came out as transgender and was subsequently asked to leave. In May 2014, *Time* magazine declared the year “the transgender tipping point” and predicted that trans issues would be “America’s next civil-rights frontier.” This was followed by the introduction of a record number of trans-exclusionary bills in state legislatures in 2015.

While transgender visibility has increased in the past five years (the number of people who personally know a trans person has doubled from 17 percent of Americans in 2014 to 35 percent just two years later),⁷ visibility itself has not always had a positive effect. As more trans people come forward and share their stories and the struggles that they face, those who find trans identities distasteful or morally corrupt feel that they must also come forward with their own opinions, policies, and theological pronouncements. In October 2015, just three months after Olympic superstar Caitlyn Jenner came out as transgender on the cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine, the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC) put together an event that they billed as “evangelical Christians’ first-ever conference on transgender issues.”⁸ No transgender people were asked to speak at this event. Instead, the largely Southern Baptist-identified speakers agreed beforehand to a statement that rejected the idea that “a human being could possess a gender other than the one indicated by biological sex.” Members of the ACBC argued that gender dysphoria is a result of original sin, and Owen Strachan, the executive director of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, declared, “Even if we have never intended to choose a transgender identity, if we embrace this impulse, we are following, chasing a sinful instinct. We are in fact sinning against God.”⁹

Then, in 2016, what had previously been a predominantly theological debate, between conservative Christians and those who supported transgender justice, became an all-out battle that exploded onto the national legislative scene. On May 13, the US Justice Department and the US Department of Education sent out a joint guidance letter to all public schools, clarifying that Title IX protections against discrimination based on sex now functionally included discrimination based on gender identity. The letter stated that, in order to be in compliance with Title IX, public schools must not discriminate based on gender identity when it comes to gender-segregated spaces like restrooms, locker rooms, single-sex classes or schools, fraternities, or sororities. All schools that wished to continue receiving federal monies must be in compliance with Title IX.¹⁰

Suddenly the movement toward protection for transgender people in the United States became, in the opinion of some Christians, a threat to religious liberty. Dozens of schools began the process of requesting religious exemption waivers so that they would not have to comply with the clarified ruling¹¹—a move reminiscent of the religious exemption from providing birth control won by Hobby Lobby in 2014 and the exemption from service to same-gender couples requested by a bakery in Colorado in 2013.

But these individual corporations, small businesses, and schools were not working alone. Three powerhouses of conservative Christian social action—the Alliance Defending Freedom, the Family Research Council, and Focus on the Family—have been instrumental in providing funding and legal counsel in support of what they consider to be religious freedom. When it comes to transgender issues specifically, each of these three organizations has had a hand in stirring the pot.

While it claims not to lobby government officials or promote legislation, the Alliance Defending Freedom—whose mission statement is “To keep the doors open for the Gospel by advocating for religious liberty, the sanctity of life, and marriage and family”—has created a policy template barring transgender students from school bathrooms and has offered to defend any school district that implements such a policy.¹² This “Student Physical Privacy Act” was then used as a model upon which several state legislatures built proposals banning transgender people from the public bathrooms that aligned with their gender identity.¹³

The Family Research Council, a public-policy organization whose mission is to “advance faith, family and freedom in public policy and the culture from a Christian worldview,” has also been instrumental in influencing legislative efforts against transgender Americans. Their political action committee, the Faith Family Freedom Fund, ran advertising campaigns against Houston’s proposed Equal Rights Ordinance in 2015, claiming that if the nondiscrimination measure passed, Houstonians could be fined for blocking a man from entering a women’s bathroom. Peter Sprigg of the Family Research Council argued that including gender identity as a protected category in civil rights laws would “threaten the public safety of women and children by creating the legitimized access that sexual predators tend to seek.”¹⁴

This has not proven to be the case. In the twelve states that had included gender identity in their nondiscrimination laws as of March 2014, no one had assaulted anyone else through access gained to these spaces as a result of this

type of policy.¹⁵ Moreover, the same study done on nondiscrimination laws showed that there had never been an incident where a transgender person harassed or attacked anyone in a gendered facility, debunking the idea that transgender people are a danger to others. In fact, according to a 2013 study conducted by the Williams Institute, 70 percent of transgender people have themselves at some point been the victim of either verbal or physical assault in gendered restrooms.¹⁶

Focus on the Family is arguably the most well-known Christian ministry organization in the United States. In 2015 they updated a position statement on their website to contain an entire series on transgender issues, which included the assertion that transgender identities “violate God’s intentional design for sex and sexuality.” The statement continues,

We believe that this is a cultural and theological challenge that we must engage and win. The modern “transgender” movement is systematically working to dismantle the reality of two sexes—male and female—as the Bible and the world have always known this to be. If the transgender lobby succeeds, there will be striking consequences for individuals, marriage, family and society at large.¹⁷

In this spirit of engaging to win, Focus on the Family’s policy division, the Family Policy Alliance (formerly known as Citizen-Link), helped implement House Bill 2 in North Carolina in 2016. This bill was the first piece of state legislation signed into law that specifically required transgender people to use the bathroom or other gendered facility that corresponded with the gender marker on their birth certificate, and blocked any nondiscrimination policy that included gender identity or sexual orientation from becoming law anywhere within the state.

These two stipulations may seem inconsequential to those who don’t identify as transgender, but the stress caused by the realization that you might be arrested for entering one bathroom and harassed or attacked if you enter the other can hardly be overstated. In an interview with Greta Gustava Martela, one of the founders of the transgender crisis hotline Trans Lifeline, it was discovered that incoming calls to the crisis center doubled in the three weeks after HB2 was signed into law.¹⁸ This law, which was later found by the US Justice Department to violate the Federal Civil Rights Act, was put in place through the direct efforts of Focus on the Family and the Family Policy Alliance. According to the most

recently released IRS documentation, the FPA contributed over a third of the operating budget for their affiliate, the North Carolina Family Policy Council.¹⁹ The NCFPC, in turn, pressed North Carolina governor Pat McCrory to call a special session,²⁰ which passed HB2 through the entire state legislative process in one day.

Many other Christian denominations hold similarly negative views when it comes to transgender identities, though the actions they take may not be as recognizably detrimental. Some take a more moderate stance or promote a form of conditional acceptance. The Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution in 2014 that declares “gender identity confusion” to be the effect of a fallen human nature, and something that must not be encouraged or normalized. Toward the end of the same document it is resolved that the Convention “love our transgender neighbors, seek their good always, welcome them to our churches and, as they repent and believe in Christ, receive them into church membership.”²¹ Though the statement calls for a loving response, the emphasis is placed on a required repentance, which presupposes three things: that transgender identities are themselves sinful, that a trans person can reject their identity if they try hard enough, and that trans identities are incompatible with faith in Christ.

Other Christian groups, like the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), have focused not so much on transgender identities as on a person’s physical transition. The LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations released a statement in 2014 that advises pastors to discourage any form of transition for transgender congregants, and instead suggests that pastors refer trans people to a Christian therapist.²² In the same year, the Assemblies of God churches adopted a statement “discouraging any and all attempts to physically change, alter, or disagree with [a person’s] predominant biological sex—including but not limited to elective sex-reassignment, transvestite, transgender, or nonbinary ‘genderqueer’ acts or conduct.”²³ While these statements do not give much direction on how to treat a transgender person who has already transitioned, they create an environment that would give any current member some significant second thoughts before coming out.

The extent to which a transgender member might be allowed to be involved in the life of the church has also been a point of dissention for many Christians. Some denominations welcome transgender people looking for a church home but deny them official membership. Others allow membership but won’t elect a trans person into any leadership position. The Roman Catholic Church made the news

in 2015 after the Vatican's policy-enforcing arm, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, determined that transgender people are not eligible to become godparents. After Alex Salinas requested to become his nephew's godfather, the church stated that being openly transgender "reveals in a public way an attitude opposite to the moral imperative of solving the problem of sexual identity according to the truth of one's own sexuality."²⁴ The statement went on to say that Salinas was not fit to become a godparent because "it is evident that this person does not possess the requirement of leading a life according to the faith and in the position of godfather."

This was a blow to Catholics who had hoped that the church under Pope Francis's leadership would be a more welcoming place for LGBTQ+ Christians. Francis himself faced criticism for what many saw as a comparison between transgender people and nuclear weapons during an interview with authors Andrea Tornielli and Giacomo Galeazzi in their book *This Economy Kills: Pope Francis on Capitalism and Social Justice*. During a part of the interview in which he talks about things that destroy the order of creation, Francis uses the following examples: "Let's think of the nuclear arms, of the possibility to annihilate in a few instants a very high number of human beings. Let's think also of genetic manipulation, of the manipulation of life, or of the gender theory, that does not recognize the order of creation."²⁵ The phrase "gender theory," while having many possible meanings, usually encompasses the ways sociologists have come to understand the human experience in terms of spectrums of sex, gender, and gender expression. Francis appears to be articulating his opinion that these ranges of human experience are outside God's created order and may even be dangerous.

What effect must it have on young transgender Catholics to know that their church community considers them unnatural and dangerous? What does a transgender member of an Assemblies of God church do when they're told transitioning is not an option? When James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family, goes on record encouraging men to "defend your wife's privacy and security in restroom facilities" against "a strange-looking man, dressed like a woman," and lamenting the fact that it's no longer acceptable to shoot the transgender person in this situation, what effect does this have on our country?²⁶

The year 2016 was the deadliest on record for transgender people in the United States.²⁷ Twenty-seven transgender people were murdered that year, compared to the twenty-one people we lost in 2015, and the thirteen killed in 2014—and these are just the murders that we know about.²⁸ Oftentimes

transgender people are misgendered by law enforcement and news agencies after their death; as a result, their true identities and their stories are lost to us. Additionally, it's crucial to note that the majority of transgender homicide victims are women of color—specifically, Black trans women—who must deal with the triple threat of sexism, racism, and transphobia. With at least twenty-one murders of transgender people counted in our country within the first ten months of the year, 2017 may set an abhorrent new high.

The Human Rights Campaign put forward a report in 2011 that attempted to understand the reasons behind the current murder epidemic. They found that, when all other factors were accounted for, transgender people were disproportionately affected by homelessness, poverty, job discrimination, bullying in school, and harassment by law enforcement.²⁹ Essentially, the mental and emotional bias that American culture holds against transgender individuals leaks out into real-world actions against trans people, whether that action is turning down a nonbinary applicant for a job or gunning down a trans woman in a bathroom.

When our churches support or even organically formulate the idea that transgender people are morally, intellectually, or theologically inferior, we feed right into the hatred that leads to death for an already marginalized group. The HRC's report found that 41 percent of trans individuals have attempted suicide, compared to 1.6 percent of the general population of the United States. Nearly half of trans folks attempt suicide, not because there's something inherently wrong with them, but because they experience a phenomenon called "minority stress."³⁰ Minority stress describes the friction that occurs between a person who holds a marginalized identity and the hostile environment in which they live. Transgender people live with a continuous expectation of rejection, and many experience an endless underlying current of fear because of the threat of physical or emotional violence. This constant stress can lead to depression, anxiety, substance-abuse disorders, and suicidal thoughts and actions. A study coordinated by the Williams Institute and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention found direct evidence of minority stress when they discovered that suicide rates among transgender and gender-nonconforming adults jumped from the base 41 percent to 59 percent among those who were harassed at work, 61 percent among those who were harassed by law-enforcement officers, and 78 percent among those who experienced physical or sexual violence.³¹

The strain on transgender people has increased with the advent of bathroom bills and the legislation of gendered spaces. Williams Institute manager of

transgender research Jody L. Herman confirmed that experiences in gendered restrooms are significantly affecting levels of minority stress. She states unequivocally that “policies to protect transgender people’s access to restrooms can be understood as policies that are connected to the health and well-being of transgender people.”³²

Living every hour of your life with your guard up can take its toll on anyone, but for LGBTQ+ and transgender people, the stress can be deadly. Yet Christian churches and organizations continue to advocate and fund policies that make this state of being inescapable.

If the high rates of suicide and murder for transgender people can be traced to legitimate fears of harassment, discrimination, and rejection, then the obvious solution is to create an environment in which the injured, the worn-out, and the hopeless feel safe and loved. In fact, the number one predictor of health and well-being in LGBTQ+ youth is family acceptance and the creation of a safe haven at home.³³ Over half of the LGBTQ+ young people who were rejected by their families reported having attempted suicide, compared to only 32 percent of those who had supportive families. Family acceptance is also a protection against depression, substance abuse, and other negative mental health issues that are usually seen in those who experience minority stress.

The problem is that family acceptance itself is intricately tied to religious affiliation. Many parents who try to follow their faith and do what’s best for their child’s soul may end up doing irreversible harm to their child’s physical and mental health. As Caitlin Ryan, director of the Family Acceptance Project, put it, “Most families, including very religious families, are shocked to learn that behaviors they engage in to try to help their LGBT children fit in and be accepted by others instead contribute to serious health risks, such as suicide attempts.”³⁴ What the Family Acceptance Project and others have found is that high religiosity in families is directly connected to high levels of family rejection.

When parents attend churches that teach that being transgender is sinful, they are much more likely to reject their child, once that child comes out; in turn, a child who is rejected is more likely to suffer from mental health issues and to commit suicide. This sad fact was made visible for many in the death of Leelah Alcorn, who stepped out in front of a truck in December 2014 after experiencing negative faith-based reactions from her parents and being forced to attend Christian conversion therapy to “cure” her of her gender identity.

Christianity has been dominated by the voices of those who speak out against the existence, the well-being, and the humanity of transgender people. These voices have sunk into the fabric of American culture, and the result has been a rash of murders that causes no religious outrage, no demand for justice from those who should have cared for the wounded ones on the side of the road. We have closed our ears to the cry of the parents who have lost their children because of toxic theology; we have turned away from the tears of the youth who ask if Jesus can love them just as they are. Too many of those questioning their gender identity have been made to feel that they must choose between God and an authentic and healthy life. Not all of the people forced into that decision make it out alive.

This is where transgender Christians have been forced to live: out on the edges. They walk the fine line between acceptance and rejection, between God's love and the church's judgment.

But this is also where God begins to bring life out of death, because although religious affiliation in families has been connected to rejection of LGBT children, faith can also be one of the largest contributors to well-being in youth if their religious community supports them.³⁵ We know that family acceptance and the creation of a refuge in homes and communities is incredibly important to the health of transgender people, and so we must ask, is it time for God's house to truly become a house of prayer for all people? Will we hear the words of Scripture, and the stories of the trans Christians in our midst, and allow our sanctuaries to become the spaces they were always meant to be?

The Beginner's Guide to Gender

Maybe you're a pastor with a new transgender congregant; maybe you're a faithful parent whose child just came out as genderfluid; maybe you're trans yourself and just coming to understand the connections between your faith and your identity; maybe you're a casual reader who's curious about this trans thing that everyone's talking about! Whoever you are, you probably have some questions. Before we get started on answers, though, it's important that we share some common language.

Imagine two people who speak different languages preparing dinner together. How could we talk about what kind of meal to make if we had different words for the veggies and pasta we were preparing? Realistically, we'd probably do a lot of pointing—picking up a carrot here and a sprig of thyme there, and giving the other person a questioning look as if to say, “What do you call this?”

That's what this chapter's all about: getting us on the same page and speaking the same language, so that we can have the deeper conversations over the meal later on.

Let's start with a few definitions:¹

Your *gender identity* is your internal sense of being male, female, both, or neither. Every person on earth has a gender identity, though many of us have a hard time explaining why we feel male or female (or both, or neither).

Your *gender expression* has to do with the way we make our internal sense of gender visible to other people. We express our gender through our clothing, hair, voice, and mannerisms.

Your *assigned sex*, or *sex assigned at birth*, stems from the moment the doctor declares, “It's a boy!” or “It's a girl!” These days, of course, many parents find out the assigned sex of their baby a few months earlier when the ultrasound

technician reports what they see on a screen! Someone's assigned sex is determined by a quick glance at the new baby's external genitalia, and that glance sets up each of us for a lifetime of gender expectations.

A *transgender* person is someone whose gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. "Transgender"—or "trans" for short—is an umbrella term that covers many different kinds of gender-diverse identities. "Transgender" is an adjective, or a descriptive word, so in a sentence you'd say, "Mary is a transgender woman," not "Mary is a transgender," or "Mary is transgendered." Some transgender people refer to themselves as transsexual—meaning they have medically transitioned in some way through surgery or hormone replacement—but for the majority of younger transgender people, "transsexual" is considered outdated.

Gender dysphoria is the sense of restlessness, anxiety, dissonance, or distress that can be caused by the conflict between a transgender person's gender identity and their assigned sex. For some transgender people, gender dysphoria is just an occasional nudge in the back of their mind, but for others it can be completely debilitating. For years doctors and psychologists attempted to "fix" gender dysphoria by trying to get transgender people to identify with their assigned sex—attempting to rewire the brain to match the social expectations placed on the person's body. Recently it's become clear that the only proven remedy for dysphoria is to allow the transgender person to socially and/or medically transition—to allow the body and related social expectations to change to fit the brain.²

A *cisgender* person is someone whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth. While the prefix "trans-" means "across" or "beyond," the prefix "cis-" means "on the same side." A cisgender person may express themselves in ways that aren't typical for their gender (like an aggressive, football-playing woman or an emotional man who enjoys baking), but their gender identity and assigned sex are not in conflict.

The *gender binary* is a social system in which it is assumed that people come in only two genders: male and female. This system is the norm in white, Western contexts, while some non-Western cultures may distinguish between up to seven different genders.

Gender roles govern the way we're expected to act, depending on our gender. For instance, when you try to picture a doctor or a nurse, which one do you expect to be a man and which do you expect to be a woman? In the United States gender roles have been broken down considerably in the past hundred

years, and of course we do see women who are doctors and men who are nurses, but gender roles are still enforced in many other ways.

People who are *gender-nonconforming* dress or act in a way that is not typical of their assigned sex in their particular culture, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're transgender. You might be considered gender-nonconforming if you are a cisgender man who enjoys painting his nails, or a cisgender woman who shaves her head and rides a motorcycle. Not all cisgender people conform to gender norms, and not all transgender people defy those norms.

Sexual orientation is about whom you are sexually and romantically attracted to. Being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or any other sexuality has to do with your relationship to others, while being trans has to do with your own internal gender identity and sense of self. Because gay and lesbian people are more visible in society, sometimes transgender folks may initially come out as gay, because that's the only language they've been exposed to that might explain their feelings at the time. However, sexual orientation and gender identity are two separate things, and being gay does not lead to becoming transgender. You can think of sexual orientation as a horizontal line, and gender identity as a vertical line; though these two things aren't the same, they can sometimes intersect. For instance, a transgender man may be attracted to other men, which would make him both transgender and gay; or he may be attracted to women, in which case he would be transgender and straight.

Oftentimes people who are just learning about trans identities can feel confused about how to address a trans person. Is a transgender man someone who was assigned male at birth, or someone who has a male gender identity? Here's the easy way to remember which is which: you always refer to the person's gender in the present. Since you're referring to this person now you should refer to their present gender identity, not the sex they were assigned in the past. So, for instance, a *transgender man* is someone who was assigned female at birth but who now has a male gender identity. Similarly, a *transgender woman* is someone who was assigned male at birth but whose gender identity now is female.

Besides transgender men and women, there are many other kinds of gender identities that fall under the trans umbrella.

A *nonbinary* person is someone who doesn't identify strictly as either a man or a woman. They may see themselves as a blend of both male and female, or as another gender altogether.

Some nonbinary people like to refer to themselves as *genderqueer*, which can act as a catchall term for people who feel as if language doesn't yet have the words to describe their gender. It's a term that's flexible, which can be helpful for people just coming to understand their gender identity.

Someone who is *genderfluid*, *bigender*, or *pangender* may have a gender identity that fluctuates between male, female, or another gender. They may feel female and express themselves in stereotypically feminine ways one day, and feel male the next day, and feel androgynous the day after that. All of these experiences are part of the person's single gender identity.

Agender people don't identify with any specific gender at all. They may express this by dressing more androgynously—or they may not, depending on social pressures and personal preference.

Some people have culturally specific gender categories, such as the *Two Spirit* people in many Native American tribes, the *fa'afafine* of Samoa, the *hijra* of India, the *sekrata* of Madagascar, and the *muxes* of Mexico. These cultures recognize more than two genders, and often people in these additional gender categories were historically held in high esteem or considered spiritually powerful in some way.

The presence of genders beyond just male and female in societies all over the world gives us a hint about how long transgender people have existed. Far from being a new trend, there have been gender-nonconforming and nonbinary people throughout human history. It would be anachronistic to say that these people were transgender as we understand that word today, but we do know that there were people who didn't fit the gender norms of their time and who lived lives in gender roles that didn't match their assigned sex. Ashurbanipal, an ancient king of Syria also known as Sardanapalus, was known for dressing in women's clothing, adopting feminine ways of speaking and acting, and spending time spinning and making clothing.³ Hatshepsut, one of the most famous pharaohs, was assigned female at birth, but took on the male kingship of Egypt and was immortalized in statues and wall art with a beard and the short skirt typically worn by male Egyptians.⁴

One of the very first written descriptions of gender--nonconformity in what is today the United States comes from the writings of Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, a Spanish conquistador who traveled through what is now the American southwest in the 1530s. In his journals he described his stay with the Coahuiltecan people who lived in the Rio Grande valley. He noted that they

accepted a third gender made up of individuals whom Cabeza de Vaca himself identified as men, but who acted and dressed like Coahuiltecan women. While the Coahuiltecan culture accepted these differences, Cabeza de Vaca, a Catholic, condemned these gender-nonconformers and described the whole experience as “a piece of devilry.”⁵

This was par for the course when it came to Western interactions with the Native peoples of the Americas. Not all conquistadors were content merely to criticize Native practices in writing; Vasco Núñez de Balboa, who in 1513 was the first European to cross the isthmus of Panama, set dogs on forty gender-nonconforming individuals of the Panamanian Cueva people, because he categorized them as “sodomites” for presenting as women. As historian Genny Beemyn put it, “Europeans did not agree on what to make of cultures that recognized non-binary genders. Lacking comparable institutional roles in their own societies, they labeled the aspects that seemed familiar to them.”⁶ This generally meant labeling anyone who expressed their gender in an unconventional way as either a sodomite or a hermaphrodite—terms that were inaccurate then and unacceptable now.

In the 1600s, in the colonies that would eventually become the famous thirteen, several people were tried for presenting as a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth. In Massachusetts, Mary Henly was charged with dressing in men’s clothing in 1692 after a complaint was filed that she was “seeming to confound the course of nature.”⁷ By the 1800s so many people were expressing their gender in unconventional ways through clothing that laws were written specifically to prevent it! Presenting oneself in “dress not belonging to his or her sex” became a criminal offense, first in Columbus, Ohio, in 1848, and then later in Chicago, San Francisco, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Miami, and at least thirty-three other cities—with the most recent legislation enacted in 1974.⁸

Transgender people really became visible in 1953, when Christine Jorgensen returned to the United States after having received gender-confirmation surgery in Denmark.*

Christine had been in the military; on December 1, 1952, the *New York Daily News* ran a front-page story on her experience titled “Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty” and launched her into the public eye. Christine, who was seen not as a threat so much as an interesting experiment, published bits of her story in several magazines and newspapers and made appearances on national talk shows, always advocating for the acceptance of other people like her.

Another milestone came on June 28, 1969, when police attempted to raid the Stonewall Inn on the grounds that the inn did not have a valid liquor license.⁹ Stonewall was known as one of the only places in New York City where members of the blossoming LGBTQ+ community could come together and be themselves, despite the fact that the city currently had laws on the books that criminalized both homosexuality and gender-nonconforming expression through clothing. During this time, liquor licenses were intentionally revoked from bars that were known to be LGBTQ+ hangouts, so that law enforcement personnel would have a reason to arrest the customers and close the bar. Raids all over the city were becoming increasingly common, and on that early morning in June a few members of the community decided that they'd had enough. Among those who fought back were two self-described drag queens, Marsha P. Johnson¹⁰ and Sylvia Rivera,¹¹ and a transgender woman named Miss Major Griffin-Gracy.¹² All three were women of color—both Marsha and Miss Major were and are African American, and Sylvia was born to Venezuelan and Puerto Rican parents—and these intersections were reflected in their activism.

During this time, labels for gender-diverse people were evolving rapidly, and there has been some debate about whether Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera identified as transgender, or whether that label could be relevant today. We do know that they worked together to form the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (later renamed the Street Transgender Action Revolutionaries), an organization that helped feed, clothe, and shelter hundreds of homeless gender-diverse people in New York City. Miss Major, for her part, is possibly the most revered transgender elder still living, and she continues to advocate for justice on behalf of incarcerated transgender people worldwide, especially for low-income individuals and people of color.

These gender-diverse people in history help us put societal reactions in context, as well as give us a sense of the true range of human variation. But which parts of our identities are socially constructed, and which parts may be biologically set in stone?

One of the things you may notice about the definitions provided in this chapter is that we sometimes use the word “sex” and other times use the word “gender.” Many of us have grown up using these two terms interchangeably—especially if we’re uncomfortable with the word “sex” in the first place! As we’ve come to understand more about human experiences with gender, however, these two words have come to mean different things. The easiest way to think about this

difference is by saying that “gender is what’s between your ears, and sex is what’s between your legs”; that is, your *gender* is mental and emotional and has to do with your personality, while your *sex* has to do with specific parts of your physical body, like your genitals and your sex chromosomes. That distinction between the two terms has been fairly commonplace for the last forty years or so,¹³ but more recently we’ve found that humans may be more complex than this simplistic description allows.

For instance, we can agree that gender roles and gender expression are different from culture to culture. The Aka men of the Central African Republic and Republic of the Congo are expected to be nurturing and gentle, and spend more time holding and caring for children than men in any other society in the world.¹⁴ The women of the Mosuo, or Na, people in China, the largest matrilineal society on earth, own all the property, lead the family businesses, and pass on inheritance from mother to daughter.¹⁵ One of the best examples of gender expression changing over time comes from the Western world, where in early 1900s we saw a change in the way we dress babies. Up until World War I it was common to dress all children under age six, regardless of gender, in white dresses, because they were easy to bleach! Then, around 1918, department stores began to suggest that parents dress their girls in blue and their boys in pink, because “pink, being a more decided and stronger color, is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl.”¹⁶ It wasn’t until the 1940s that the preferred colors switched genders in the United States; to this day, baby boys are still dressed in pink in some European countries, including Belgium.

So while gender expression and gender roles are at least partially socially constructed, it’s generally been thought that sex is a biological construct that would be the same, even if we didn’t have social pressures and expectations shaping us. After all, within the scope of natural conception we don’t have the ability to control a baby’s chromosomes or the development of specific genitals. But some researchers, like Anne Fausto--Sterling, disagree. She argues that sex is also socially constructed, because there’s nothing in nature that decides whether XX and XY chromosomes or testicles and ovaries should be categorized as male or female or something else altogether. It’s humans who make that distinction and who decide what is within the range of normal for a particular category.¹⁷ This fact is made most clear when we consider the ways in which intersex children have historically been surgically manipulated to make their

differences in sex development fit our own comfort levels—a problem we’ll talk more about in [chapter 4](#).

In the end, while we do know that sex and gender are separate concepts—with gender referring to the internal self and sex referring to the external self—there is not a consensus yet on whether these two categories are entirely biological or entirely human-made.

Among those who believe that both sex and gender are entirely biological, there is a subset of gender essentialists. *Gender essentialism* is the belief that there are innate, unchangeable differences between men and women—that a man has a certain male essence that makes him who he is, and that his essence is the biological and spiritual opposite of the essence that a woman has that makes her who she is. This position crops up in think pieces about the differences between men’s and women’s brains, with headlines like “Why Your Husband Won’t Ask for Directions: The Surprising Brain Structure behind Men’s Ability to Think Spatially.” We’ve all seen the articles suggesting that men’s brains are more adept at math and science, while women’s brains are better at relating to other people and caring for children. The problem with these kinds of studies is that they often don’t take into consideration the social factors that play a part; for instance, maybe your husband doesn’t ask for directions not because he’s more spatially aware but because he’s afraid of looking weak or “unmanly” in front of you. Maybe women are better at child care because they’ve been forced into the role of babysitter and mother their whole lives, and they’ve had to become good at it, to keep from being shamed for not being “feminine enough.”

Of course, there are some differences that can be seen between the brains of cisgender men and cisgender women; for instance, a certain amount of white matter or the number of neural connections in a particular region may be more common in one sex than another. Overall, though, researchers are now coming to the conclusion that the brains of cisgender men and women are more similar than they are different, and that previous studies have been either skewed or based on too small a sample.¹⁸ Indeed, a recent study on a large number of MRI brain scans showed that, although there were differences between the brains of cisgender men and women, only 6 percent of the brains were consistently on one side of the male-female spectrum, while most brains looked stereotypically male in some regions and stereotypically female in others, with a substantial bell curve right in the middle.¹⁹

Even though these studies tend to exaggerate differences, let's go ahead and ask one more science question: where do the brains of transgender people fit along this spectrum? As it turns out, the white matter in three key regions of the brains of transgender men was more similar to that in brains of cisgender men than that in brains of cisgender women.²⁰ Similarly, the white matter in four regions of the brains of transgender women was more similar to that in brains of cisgender women than that in brains of cisgender men.²¹ It's important to note that both of these studies were done on transgender people before they had any kind of hormone therapy. What we can take from all this is that parts of the brains of transgender people seem to match their true gender, rather than their assigned sex, though we don't yet know if this difference is something that exists when the person is born or something that develops over time.

For now, it appears that science can tell us something about how transgender people experience their own identity, and sociology and anthropology can help give us context when it comes to the overall human experience. But what can theology tell us about gender diversity? Is there a doctrine that could help us understand why transgender people exist in the first place?

* Although we used to refer to this process as "gender reassignment surgery," the term has fallen out of use because the person's gender isn't actually being changed or reassigned. Instead, surgery can affirm the gender identity the person already has. Similarly, the phrase "sex change" is no longer used because it tends to conflate the separate concepts of sex and gender.

Sin, Sickness, or Specialty?

We don't know why people are transgender. That is, we don't yet know the scientific or medical reason behind the fact that a percentage of humans on earth—1.4 million adults in the United States alone¹—have a gender identity that doesn't match the sex they were assigned at birth. Could it be the hormones we're exposed to in the womb? Could it be caused by some rogue genetic material? Maybe it has to do with the way our brains are wired in the first two years of life, when we're learning so much so fast. Or perhaps there's some kind of learned component that has to do with the way we perceive gender as we grow. Maybe it's a combination of all of these things. The fact is that right now it's a mystery.

But just as we had the story of God's flood-ending rainbow before we understood prisms and light refraction, the fact that we don't yet understand the science behind gender hasn't stopped us from trying to understand our identities theologically. Some Christians see transgender identities as sinful in some way. Others see people who experience gender dysphoria not as morally good or bad, but merely as a group experiencing a kind of mental illness. A third group sees being transgender as just another expression of diversity in creation. So which is it? Is being transgender a sin, a sickness, or a specialty?

In 2015, Christian psychologist Mark Yarhouse published a book in which he dug deeply into these differing points of view. In *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture*, Yarhouse formalized a three-part structure for understanding each of these beliefs, in the hope that people who hold different positions might be able to have more productive conversations. Let's take a look at each of Yarhouse's three

frameworks—and the proponents and theology behind them—to try to get a better sense of where we are in this discussion.

Yarhouse calls his first way of understanding trans identities “the integrity framework.”² Someone who holds to this framework would consider conflict between one’s assigned sex and gender identity sinful because it messes with what they believe to be the strictly male or female nature God gives each of us. In this view, transgender people exist because people are bound to go astray, and proponents of this view tend to see any attempt to move away from one’s assigned sex as rebellion against what God has ordained. Yarhouse lifts up Robert Gagnon, a theologian who is well-known for his work condemning same-sex relationships and marginalized sexualities, as an example of someone who believes that one’s gender is predetermined and set in stone.

For Gagnon, the root of the problem with trans identities has to do with gender complementarity. He believes that “there are only two primary sexes, ‘male and female’ or ‘man’ and ‘woman,’” and that “sexual intercourse represents the merger of the two halves of the sexual spectrum. What a man brings to the table, so to speak, of a sexual union is his essential maleness; a woman, her essential femaleness.”³ Gender complementarians believe that “distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order, and should find an echo in every human heart.”⁴ Therefore, someone whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex presents a problem.

Or, rather, they present two problems. The first issue, according to the integrity framework, is that the transgender person is not fulfilling their ordained gender role, as decided by their assigned sex, in everyday life. Men should be protectors, providers, and leaders; women should be nurturers, helpers, and submissive to the leadership of the men in their life.

The second issue is that gender complementarity requires that each person sexually pair up with a person of the “opposite sex.” But what is the opposite of a nonbinary person’s gender? And should a trans man be dating a cisgender man (in which case their relationship might be seen as gay) or a cisgender woman (in which case the trans man must be recognized as fully male)? The minute a trans person tries to exist within the structure of gender complementarity, things start to get tricky.

The answer, from the perspective of the integrity framework, is that anyone who has a gender identity that doesn’t match their assigned sex needs to find a way to get that gender identity to fall in line. The trans person is encouraged to

see dysphoria and the internal struggle between their gender identity and their assigned sex as their particular cross to bear, or as part of the flesh that must be crucified in order to become a new creation in Christ. Diversion from the assigned role is considered sinful, and repentance is necessary.

It's not surprising that transgender people who live within this context, whether by choice or because no other options are available, often find themselves full of shame and self-hatred.⁵ You can roll the boulder up the hill only so many times before you realize that, no matter how hard you push and how hard you pray, that boulder's going to roll back down again.

The real strength of the integrity framework is its focus on biblical authority and the desire to follow God's will in our lives. For most Christians, trans Christians included, those two factors are incredibly important. But what if the Bible does not actually portray humankind as neatly divided into cisgender men and cisgender women (a topic we'll discuss at length in [chapter 4](#))? What if the gender roles that the integrity framework prizes are not so much divinely ordained as they are human-made (something we'll discuss in [chapter 5](#))?

The second framework Yarhouse introduces is called "the disability framework." He explains that in this framework "gender dysphoria is viewed as a result of living in a fallen world in which the condition—like so many mental health concerns—is a nonmoral reality."⁶ Yarhouse is hesitant to refer to people as transgender. As a psychologist and major proponent of this view, Yarhouse does not see people as having a trans identity, but rather as individuals who are currently struggling with a mental-health condition in the form of gender dysphoria. He explains, "The person may have choices to make that are associated with their response to symptoms or overall treatment approach ... and those choices may have moral and ethical dimensions, but their condition is not one they chose; that is, they are not morally culpable for having it."

This change in moral status is the main difference between the identity framework and the disability framework. In the former, the transgender person is deliberately disobeying God; in the latter, they're merely a victim of original sin like every other human being. This distinction can cause a radical shift in attitudes toward trans people, because it means that they can receive compassionate pastoral care that doesn't shame them for their thoughts, feelings, and internal experiences. Yarhouse works hard to create a bridge to help move Christians from an accusatory view to a compassionate view, and for some trans people that shift may ultimately be life-saving.

In relating gender dysphoria to the fall, Yarhouse says, “I think the fall can be seen in the lack of congruence between birth sex and psychological sense of gender identity, particularly when this is strong enough to cause distress and impairment.”⁷ Theologically, it makes sense to consider things that cause pain and suffering in our world to be a result of the fall and humankind’s disobedience after creation, but not all suffering is the same. For instance, if a tornado blows through your town and flattens your house, the suffering you experience is not your fault or anyone else’s fault. Disasters do happen, and, as Jesus said when the tower at Siloam fell, those who are injured in such instances are not worse sinners than anyone else.⁸ Then there’s the kind of suffering you might experience if you try throwing a punch at a brick wall. That kind of suffering is your own fault, and in a case like that, there might be an internal issue you could use some counseling over. Historically we’ve understood hate and rage to stem from sin, and so if you were motivated by one of those feelings when you hit the wall, then we could theoretically tie your suffering to the fall. You would experience a third kind of suffering if a stranger came up to you on the street and clocked you in the jaw without any provocation or prior interaction. In this case you did nothing wrong, and even though sin might be involved, it would be strictly on the part of the stranger. This last type of suffering—the kind that comes at us from an external source—is the kind transgender people tend to experience most often.

Transgender populations do experience high rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide. Because of this, some people have attempted to argue that trans identities are inextricably and inherently linked to mental illness. As we learned in [chapter 1](#), however, these issues are directly tied to minority stress—events or conditions that minority populations experience that exceed the average person’s ability to endure, and that can then cause mental or physical illness.⁹ These events and conditions can include things like a lack of social structures that include other people like you; lack of access to institutions and resources because of your identity; experiencing verbal, physical, or mental abuse because of your differences; being subjected to stereotypes; internalizing other people’s negative views; and the lack of hope for these conditions to change in the future. We can see a distinct example of this kind of stress in studies of LGBTQ+ youth that find “the greater the young person’s expectation for rejection based on their sexual/gender identity, the more likely they are to report symptoms of anxiety, depression, and suicide ideation.”¹⁰

While minority stress is a factor that all marginalized people experience, different groups experience it in unique ways. For transgender people, minority stress can be grouped into four general categories: rejection, nonaffirmation, victimization, and discrimination.¹¹ Those experiences bleed into a person's inner sense of who they are, and lead to internalized transphobia, expectations of negative reactions from others, and the feeling that the person must hide who they are and what they're feeling. Considering all this pressure, it's not surprising that transgender people are suffering, but the suffering we experience is not original sin manifesting within us. It's the effects of the fall manifesting in the way human beings treat each other.

But what about the internal struggle that a transgender person feels between the sex they were assigned at birth and the gender that they know themselves to be? For some trans people it's only the gendered expectations that other people hold them to that cause a problem. These expectations begin when a sex is assigned at birth by another person, and continue throughout life, as that assigned sex is insisted upon by the people around them. For these folks it really is an external problem caused by others, which is then internalized.

For another group of trans people, the gender dysphoria they feel would exist even if you picked them up and set them on a desert island. In these cases the distress usually has to do with the person's body and how that body doesn't match up with that person's own sense of self. This is the only point at which it might possibly be justifiable to think of gender dysphoria as a product of the fall—the point at which the trans person experiences suffering that is neither self-inflicted nor caused by others. However, just because this suffering may be caused by original sin does not mean that the person's movement away from suffering and toward affirmation of their gender identity is sinful. While we may believe that imperfections in eyesight are related to the fall, for instance, that doesn't mean that getting fitted for glasses is wrong (we'll talk more about this in [chapter 11](#)).

The main failing of the disability framework is that it refuses to recognize the different kinds of suffering that transgender people experience. By assuming that all the suffering trans people experience is a result of that trans identity, the disability framework lets the individuals and institutions that don't affirm transgender people off the hook for the harm they cause. Instead, by looking at transgender people through a clinical lens, it suggests that trans persons must change to fit the mold, rather than changing the mold that constricts them.

Because Yarhouse begins with the assumption that binary male and female genders are mandated by God, the treatment he suggests in the disability framework has to do with alleviating the trans person's dysphoria, while also trying to get them to fit back into the expected gender mold. "I see the value in encouraging individuals who experience gender dysphoria to resolve dysphoria in keeping with their birth sex," Yarhouse explains in his chapter on prevention and treatment. "Where those strategies have been unsuccessful, there is potential value in managing dysphoria through the least invasive expressions (recognizing surgery as the most invasive step toward expression of one's internal sense of identity)." ¹²

For those who wish to manage gender dysphoria by finding a way to identify as their assigned sex, Yarhouse's methods may be welcome and helpful. Obviously a therapist who works compassionately with a patient to help them deal with difficult experiences is better than a therapist who tries to motivate and change the patient by using guilt and shame. But for the trans folks who do wish to transition—either socially or medically—this framework can be frustrating at its best and harmful at its worst. Though Yarhouse himself may not actively discourage anyone from transitioning, if that's what they want, the disability framework inherently treats the transgender person's identity as an illness that should be cured, and in the hands of other mental health practitioners it can quickly become an excuse for so-called "reparative therapy." As we saw in the case of Leelah Alcorn, this kind of treatment can lead to irreversible harm, especially for children and youth.

But what if there's another option? The "diversity framework" is Yarhouse's third example of the ways in which we might view transgender identities. He explains that this model "highlights transgender issues as reflecting an identity and culture to be celebrated as an expression of diversity." ¹³ Rather than seeing transgender folks as sinful people rebelling against God, or as mentally ill people who need treatment that helps reorient them back toward their assigned sex, the diversity framework suggests that differences in gender identities might be a natural variation in a vibrant world.

Before we get into the specifics of how this framework understands trans identities, it is worth noting the outcomes of this affirming third structure. Unlike the results produced by the two other frameworks—where nonaffirming religious views are tied to suicidal behaviors in transgender youth—the supportive results that come out of the diversity framework have been shown to

reduce levels of depression and anxiety in transgender kids.¹⁴ This alone makes the diversity framework worth taking seriously as an option.

Let's talk about theology and biology. The Psalms often describe all of creation as a testament to God's existence, love, and power—from the stars in the sky, to the mountains, fruit trees, birds, and small crawling creatures. We can see God at work throughout the cosmos, from the spirals in our fingerprints to the circling galaxies existing light-years away. When we observe the world we live in, it's hard not to notice the incredible differences across species and over space and time. Psalm 104 is known for being a hymn to this kind of biodiversity, in which the psalmist rejoices in the way God has made storks, rabbits, lions, and even sea monsters, and has given each of them a home in their particular environment.

As we observe creation we also find a huge range of physical and social differences when it comes to sex and gender. In fact, the terms “sex” and “gender” mean slightly different things to biologists than they mean to sociologists and theologians. For those studying animal physiology and behavior, “sex” refers to how an animal produces gametes, or sex cells. A biologist will take a look at the gametes an animal produces and categorize it accordingly—as male if it makes small gametes, as female if it makes large gametes, and as hermaphroditic if it makes both large and small gametes. In humans those small gametes are called sperm, while the larger gametes are called eggs, though we don't consider the production of either of those things to be the only determining factor in our sex assignment.

Throughout creation there many different kinds of plants and animals that switch back and forth between male and female—or between the creation of small and large gametes—over their lifetimes. The bluehead wrasse, for example, is a type of fish that appears to have three distinct sexes.¹⁵ When the fish are young, they are all essentially sexless; but as they mature, about a third of the fish become males and another third become females, while the last third defies our usual categorization. That last third begins life in a non-gamete-producing or sexless state, then matures into female fish that bear eggs, and then finally switches sexes and begins producing sperm cells, taking on the blue male color and growing larger than the unchanged original males! Scientists have noted that differences in the habitat of the blue wrasse mean that sometimes the unchanged males have an easier time breeding, while at other times the changed males are more successful. When a wrasse school is living in the midst of a patch of sea grass, where the small, unchanged males can hide better, they tend

to fertilize more eggs; but when the school is living in the midst of a coral reef, where everything is open and above board, the larger, changed males will fight off the unchanged males and win the ability to father their own children. This diversity in sex means that the wrasse can live in several different environments, and that wherever they live, they thrive!

Of course humans are not fish, and transgender people don't have the option to change the kinds of gametes their bodies produce, but scientists are beginning to suspect that the diversity we see in sex and gender in humans may also be beneficial for our species. In 1975 a biologist named E. O. Wilson wrote *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, in which he put forward the kin-selection hypothesis that was first used to explain why so many gay, lesbian, and bisexual people exist when most LGB folks weren't passing on their own genes directly through procreation. The kin-selection hypothesis stems from the finding that more children survive and thrive when they have LGB aunts and uncles. This is because many hands make light work, as the saying goes. Parents raising a child often benefit from having a third person around to help out, and that third person will be most available to help if they don't have children of their own. In exchange, the LGB person who is not passing on their own genes is helping to pass on the genes they share with their sibling. Ultimately, families that include LGB members can afford the time and attention it takes to raise and nurture more kids, which benefits the whole group!

These same benefits now appear to apply to transgender people and their families within cultures that support and affirm trans folks. Several studies done with the fa'afafine—the third-gender-identified people of Samoa—bear out what the kin-selection hypothesis first suggested: that transgender people who are accepted in their families are more willing to invest in their nieces and nephews than other cisgender relations.¹⁶ This in turn means that families that accept and include their transgender children and siblings are more likely to thrive together.

So if we recognize the diversity in creation, and we see that trans people whose identity is accepted have better mental-health outcomes, and we also see that groups that accept transgender members tend to succeed, why doesn't everyone agree with the diversity framework? In his description of this viewpoint Yarhouse says,

Evangelical Christians are understandably wary of the diversity framework. Evangelicals see among those who adhere to the diversity framework a small but vocal group that calls for the deconstruction of

norms related to sex and gender. I describe those efforts as a strong form of the diversity framework (as contrasted with a weak form that focuses primarily on identity and community). ... Such claims challenge not only gender norms that have been widely understood to be socially constructed but also a sex binary as something fixed and stable, tied to an essentialist view with biological foundations.¹⁷

Without oversimplifying the argument too much, it seems that the biggest stumbling block for many Christians when it comes to the diversity framework is the belief that biological sex is both cut-and-dried and also divinely decreed. Yarhouse goes on to say that while the “strong form” of the diversity framework is unacceptable to most evangelical Christians for this reason, the “weak form,” which gives trans people a sense of identity and community, may be worth considering. In the end he advocates for an “integrated framework” that takes the best each category has to offer and creates a space in which people who subscribe to each of the three lenses can have a conversation.

In the following chapters, we will hear stories from transgender Christians whose lives today are very much affected by these lenses and the conversations that surround them. We’ll look at Genesis and the first illustrations of sex and gender, and we’ll explore God’s reaction to the people who color outside those lines. We’ll journey alongside the Israelites in the wilderness; we’ll meet one of the first converts to Christianity, and we’ll dive into Paul’s letters. We’ll ask whether or not gender really is set in stone, and whether God commands any specific kind of gender conformity.

I hope that, as you enter these conversations, you’ll keep asking questions. Keep wondering about what it means to be a part of a faith that has such a rich history, and what it means to be part of a faith family that includes so many different kinds of people. When do we hold on to cherished ideas about the world, and when do we let go? When do we plant ourselves by the river of truth, and when do we admit that, for now, we only see through a glass darkly? Most importantly, how can we best love God, our neighbor, and ourselves?

To find out, we’ll need to go back to the very beginning.

PART TWO

4

And God Said, Let There Be Marshes

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

—Genesis 1:1 NIV

As a kid I would read these first words in my children’s Bible over and over again—not because I found them particularly interesting, but because I was the kind of person who always started books from the beginning, and I could never seem to get any further into the Bible than Noah and the ark before I lost interest.

I also liked the first story in my picture Bible because it had some of the best illustrations. On one page you had a friendly orange sun, and on the opposite page a shining yellow moon and twinkling stars. Next came an ocean with big waves, across from a page depicting mountains and forests. Even in a children’s Bible the distinctions God made when creating the universe were obvious. Each bit of the world was broken into pairs and opposites. For a kid who liked order and organization, the story of creation in Genesis 1 was just about perfect. There was a place for everything, and everything was in its place.

This kind of structure in Scripture was something that I appreciated up until my teen years, when I began to get a better sense of the way life sometimes fell outside black-and-white boundaries. Biologically, I learned that the world isn’t separated distinctly into land or sea; there are also marshes, estuaries, and coral reefs. Personally, when I began to figure out more about my own sense of gender identity, I wondered if all people were really divided into male and female, as

Genesis 1 seemed to say they were. For a long time I thought I was the only person worried about this biblical gender separation. Little did I know there was another person halfway across the country asking very similar questions.

The Reverend M Barclay was born and raised in Pensacola, Florida, which was, as they* describe it, “practically southern Alabama.” M grew up in The United Methodist Church, but wasn’t particularly invested in the politically and theologically conservative ideals they saw around them. “The idea of queerness or transness was not even remotely on my radar,” they explained as we talked one night. “I felt different, but I didn’t even know any gay people. Nobody talked about it.”

When M was in high school, they joined some friends who attended a youth group at a large nondenominational church in town. Rather than pews, M found comfy chairs and couches. Rather than hymns, there were praise songs. It felt as if faith was springing up fresh and new, and M took to it like a duck to water. Near the end of high school they began to discern a call to ministry, but the church M was now attending didn’t approve of women in ministry; so, as someone assigned female at birth, M hit a brick wall. “I was told, ‘Women can’t be ordained.’ So it took me two years, even when I was read as a cisgender straight woman, to overcome that basic gender barrier.”

Even though M wasn’t fully cognizant of their trans identity at this point, the roadblock they were facing would become all too familiar. “That was the constant struggle—that I felt so called to ministry, but people said that Scripture says my call isn’t accurate.”

So M found their way back to the Methodist tradition, where women have been preaching for centuries, from Sarah Mallet in 1787 and Sojourner Truth in 1827 to Maud Keister Jensen, the first woman to receive full clergy rights, in 1956.¹ “There were more people in the Methodist Church who were helping me struggle through that,” M explained. “There were Methodist women who were pastors, and I really wanted to engage with them, so that’s part of what brought me back.”

M’s faith deepened in college as they began digging into theology, and as they met people from outside their conservative Christian bubble. They started studying the Bible through a historical-critical lens, which seeks to understand the biblical world and the intentions behind the text in the original language, rather than taking every word literally as we read it in English today. As they read the works of scholars and clergy through the ages, it became clear that there was more than one way to read and interpret the Bible. This was a wonderful and

confusing discovery for M, as they realized that not everything they had been taught as a young person was undisputed fact. It also opened their eyes to the possibility that God's acceptance or rejection of LGBTQ+ people might not be an open-and-shut case, as they had once thought.

Shortly out of college, M embarked on their seminary training. Their calling to ministry was as strong as ever, but internally they were struggling with their beliefs about queer identities in the midst of a life of faith. M explained,

One of the most important shifts for me in terms of understanding identities came when I was in seminary. I remember a key moment, watching my best friend come out. He's a gay guy, and I was almost there when it came to fully accepting LGBT people, but I hadn't quite worked it all out yet, theologically. But watching him come to life over the course of his coming-out process just sealed the deal for me. My friend's coming out wasn't opposed to my understanding of God as love, as the One who creates, as the One who brings forth life in each of us.

After witnessing this, M's metric for measuring a life of faith was changed. "My understanding of Scripture became filtered through this question: 'Does this behavior, or identity, or way of being in the world create life? Within a person or within the community?'"

When we read about the way God creates life in Genesis 1, it begins with the separation of light and darkness and, by extension, the creation of day and night. Next, God divides the waters of the deep into two categories: the waters above the sky and the waters below the sky. Then those waters below the sky are parted and gathered together to create two separate domains: the land and the sea. God populates the sky with birds, the sea with fish and other ocean creatures, and the earth with plants and land animals. With each act of creation, from verse 1 to verse 25, God is separating, categorizing, and bringing order out of chaos.

For the Hebrew people of the ancient world, these acts of separation and ordering were intimately familiar. The Torah laws that defined them and identified them as God's people were based on these acts of separation between the sacred and the profane, and between the commendable and the abominable. In Deuteronomy 14, a chapter full of examples of this kind of separation, we find one of God's commands to the Hebrew people regarding food. In Deuteronomy 14:9–10 we read that sea creatures that have both scales and fins may be eaten,

but if they have only *one* of those characteristics, they are considered unclean and not fit for eating.

Scholars and Jewish leaders have debated the reasoning behind the rules God lays out in the first five books of the Bible, and there are dozens of plausible theories. What's obvious is that rules like these not only made it easier for God's people to identify good food from possibly dangerous food, but also created ideological boxes that helped people understand the world around them.

So imagine you're an ancient Hebrew fisherman, out casting your nets into the sea one day. When you drag up your net you find a few mackerel, some jellyfish, and a lobster. You take one look at the scales and the fins on the mackerel and think "fish." You know without a doubt that's a fish, and it's good to eat. But what if you've never seen a jellyfish or a lobster before? Are they fish? Well, you can't see any fins or scales, so therefore they are outside the category of "fish," and can't be eaten. Though you may live your whole life without experiencing the wonder of garlic-butter lobster tail, you also miss out on being stung in the mouth by that jellyfish. These categories kept people safe and helped order the world.

Because these categories applied to every part of life—from the grain in the fields to the dinner table to the temple -sacrifices—it's not surprising to find the same kinds of separations in the Genesis 1 creation account. Almost all of this first chapter deals in dualities like light and dark, earth and sky, land and water. Then, we get to verse 27:

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

Based on the dualities we've seen in this chapter, it's not surprising to find humans broken into two groups here: male and female God created them. But this verse does not discredit other sexes or genders, any more than the verse about the separation of day from night rejects the existence of dawn and dusk. As M Barclay puts it, "This chapter talks about night and day and land and water, but we have dusk and we have marshes. These verses don't mean 'there's only land and water, and there's nowhere where these two meet.' These binaries aren't meant to speak to all of reality—they invite us into thinking about everything between and beyond." In the same way we call God the Alpha and Omega, implying all things from first to last and in between, the author of

Genesis 1 is merely using the same dualistic poetic device to corral the infinite diversity of creation into categories we can easily understand.

The reality is that, for as long as there have been humans, there have been people who fall outside of the male/female binary. In a creation story from Sumer, another Mesopotamian society and neighbor to what would become Israel, we find references from 1600 BCE to humans who are created with sex organs that are not immediately identifiable as “female” or “male.”² In the Mishnah and the Talmud, the Jewish compilations of oral law put together between 200 CE and 500 CE, we see several examples of individuals who don’t fit male or female categories within Jewish culture, including those whose sex is indeterminable, those who have characteristics of more than one sex, and those whose characteristics change over time.³ This tells us that even the descendants of the Hebrew people who recorded Genesis 1 did not necessarily assume that the gender or sex categories seen in verse 27 were all-encompassing.

In Greek and Roman times, people born with indeterminate or ambiguous sex characteristics were called hermaphrodites, after a Greek god who exhibited both male and female traits. Today people with a combination of different sex characteristics identify themselves as intersex, and we know that they make up between 0.018 percent and 1.7 percent of the world’s population.⁴ Throughout history, doctors have attempted to “fix” intersex infants through surgical intervention before a child can make any decisions for themselves, and sometimes even without the knowledge or consent of the parents.

Fortunately, intersex advocates all over the world are finally seeing the positive results of their push for self-determination, and groups like the Intersex Society of North America are helping stop the modification of babies identified as intersex at birth. All this begins to tell us that the interactions between chromosomes, hormone production, and physiology are much more complicated than we once thought. Not all people are born male or female; if we try to enforce that binary, we put ourselves in the position of claiming to know better than God. Indeed, as theologian and specialist on intersex issues Megan DeFranza puts it, “The simplistic binary [sex] model is no longer sufficient. It is dishonest to the diversity of persons created in the image of God.”⁵

When we attempt to box God’s creation in by looking to Genesis 1:27 and expecting every person on earth to fall into line, we’re asking the text the wrong question. If Genesis 1 was meant to describe the world as it is, the biblical authors would have needed a scroll hundreds of feet long! Thank goodness we don’t have to slog through verse after verse that reads like a biology textbook on

taxonomy, naming creature after creature from the elephant down to the paramecium. Just as we wouldn't expect astronomers to cram things like comets and black holes into the categories for sun or moon, we shouldn't expect all humans to fit into the categories "male" and "female," just because those are the only two listed in Genesis 1. Instead of asking the text to define and label all that is, we can ask God to speak into the space between the words, between biblical times and our time, and between categories we see as opposites.

When I asked M Barclay if they identified with the concept of in-between places in space and time, their answer surprised me. I had always assumed that all nonbinary people identified somewhere between male and female, and as M explained, that's a fairly common misconception. While the term "nonbinary" has become a simple way to refer to someone who doesn't have a strict male or female gender identity, the term is intrinsically flawed. "To say that you're nonbinary innately suggests there is a binary, and my whole point is that there's no such thing," M clarified. "We've created this formula and forced our understanding of gender into it."

Instead of seeing themselves as halfway between male and female, M and many other nonbinary people identify as something completely different.

"I'm very convicted to speak about my own nonbinary identity not as an 'in-between,' but as a 'more,'" M told me. "So, for instance, as someone who's bisexual, I don't think of myself as half gay and half straight. I'm something else. I know some nonbinary people think of themselves as half man and half woman, but I don't. When we open the [gender binary] boxes, it's much more a scattering of things than a line."

Since noted sexologist Alfred Kinsey began publishing his reports on sexuality in 1948, people in the Western world have become more aware of sexuality as it exists along a spectrum. While some people may identify as strictly gay or strictly straight, rating as either a 1 or a 6 respectively on the Kinsey Scale, more people tend to fit somewhere within the mid-range. In the same way, over the past twenty or thirty years, we've become more comfortable with the idea of gender—especially gender expression—existing along a spectrum with points all along from A to Z—or F to M, as it were.

But charting our identities along a line in two dimensions has its limitations; namely, it doesn't accurately reflect the human diversity we observe. We don't see each other, or ourselves, in only two dimensions, and bisexual and nonbinary advocates are suggesting that it's long past time to update our ideology. Perhaps,

instead of insisting that each person can be charted along a line, we should be looking up and seeing the multitude of sexualities and gender identities that exist in 3D, sprinkled through space like the stars.

This expansion in our understanding of the world also opens the door to a new reverence for God's creation. In acknowledging when we've misunderstood something about the world, and changing our theories and behavior in response, we're admitting our humanity and humbling ourselves before the Creator. In the same way, when we recognize that our language doesn't accurately represent what is, we create new words to illustrate those concepts.

"Once I said I was not a cisgender woman, the response was, 'Oh, you must feel really masculine.' But masculinity is not something that I feel represents who I am either," M admitted. "Our language for masculinity and femininity represents our reliance on the idea of a binary. I desperately want a third word, because I don't feel like a masculine person and I don't feel like a feminine person. I desperately wish there were more words for naming our different ways of being in the world."

Genesis 1:27 doesn't give us any new words to help us understand the reality of human gender, but it does provide us with a new theological concept. We are told that humans are made in the image of God—the *imago Dei*, as theologians call it. Because the creation of male and female is mentioned almost in the same breath, many people have wondered if the two are somehow related.⁶ Which part of us reflects the image of God? Might it have anything to do with our sex or our gender?

In his famous work *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth laid out an in-depth study of the way the *imago Dei* has been interpreted over time. A later writer summed up his findings by saying, "Each interpreter has given content to the concept solely from the anthropology and theology of his own age."⁷ In other words, each great thinker looked at the world through the lens of their particular time and place, as we all do. For instance, Athanasius of Alexandria, a bishop in the fourth century, believed that the image of God given to humans was our logic. Considering the importance of logic among the Greek Stoics and within the Roman Empire that ruled Alexandria at the time, it would make sense for Athanasius to come to this conclusion. It also makes sense that when we observe the behavior of nonhuman creatures, one thing that seems to set us apart is our ability to reason.

Not all scholars have come to this same conclusion—far from it. It's probably easiest to group theories about the image of God into three categories. One group of thinkers believes, like Athanasius, that we reflect the image of God in some way through a nonphysical characteristic we've been given. A second group believes that God's image is stamped on us in a bodily sense: through our gender, the shape of our bodies, or even the way we walk on two legs. A third group sees the image of God as something relational, which affects the way humans relate to God and to the rest of creation.

The earliest work that suggests the image of God has to do with our physical bodies can be found in an article by German scholar Theodore Nöldeke in 1897. Given that Christians have understood the Creator God we see in Genesis 1 to exist without a body, many people considered this a stretch. Then in 1940 another text study was done regarding the Hebrew words for “image” and “likeness.” The same words were used to describe statues and other artwork in the Bible, suggesting that perhaps there was some physical connection.⁸ A third study published several years later pointed out that these same two words are used in Genesis 5:3 when Adam fathers his son Seth: “Adam ... became the father of a son in his likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth.” “God created Adam in his image; Adam begot Seth in his image. The second statement is very clear: the son looks like the father; he resembles him in form and appearance. The first statement is to be interpreted accordingly: the first human resembles God in form and appearance.”⁹

But there's a crucial difference between these two passages, in the verb that's used to describe producing a new person. For God, that verb is “create,” while for Adam it is “beget.” While fathering a child is in some ways an act of creation, any parent can tell you that you don't get much of a choice when it comes to that child's looks or personality. On the contrary, when God creates, God has the perfect freedom to make things in whatever way God wants.

Some modern scholars have suggested that the image of God is represented in our physical sex, and that this image is most fully realized when a cisgender man and a cisgender woman join together in marriage, essentially putting back together something that had been separated.¹⁰ Others, like theologian James Brownson, disagree: “The fact that male and female are both created in the divine image is intended to convey the value, dominion, and relationality shared by both men and women, but not the idea that the complementarity of the genders is somehow necessary to fully express or embody the divine image.”¹¹

Near the end of his survey of the *imago Dei*, Barth concludes, “The passage Gen. 1:26–31 does not seem to pay any more attention to the body of man than it does to his soul or intellectual and spiritual nature.”¹² Indeed, it would have been strange for the ancient Hebrew people to think of a human as something broken up into mind, body, and soul, as we do today. This sort of thinking is a product of Greek philosophy, and wouldn’t have existed at the time Genesis 1 was written. Hebrew Bible scholar Claus Westermann put it this way: “The discussion whether the image and likeness of God referred to the corporeal or the spiritual aspect of the person has brought us to the conclusion that the question has been placed incorrectly.” Instead, he says, this verse “is concerned neither with the corporeal nor with the spiritual qualities of people; it is concerned only with the person as a whole.”¹³

For M Barclay, living as a reflection of God’s image is possible only when you’re living as a whole person—authentically, and without certain sections severed or hidden. When I asked M if they subscribed to any specific theory about the *imago Dei*, they introduced me to the reformer John Wesley’s sermons on the subject. “I love John Wesley’s approach to the image of God. For him it’s about relational capabilities, not about a single innate characteristic.” Wesley imagined the *imago Dei* to be made up of three different parts: he preached that people were made in God’s natural image (“a spiritual being, endued with understanding, freedom of will, and various affections”); in God’s political image (“the governor of this lower world, having dominion over the fishes of the sea, and over all the earth”); and in God’s moral image (“in righteousness and true holiness” and “full of love”).¹⁴ He believed this was our default way of being before the fall, but that people are still able to live into these characteristics with God’s help.

For M, the possibility of living into the moral image of God is most striking. “Wesley uses a breath image and says that we breathe in the compassion, generosity, and the love of God, and we should be exhaling the same thing to others. So it’s all about how we orient ourselves toward each other and toward creation.”

The thing is, we can’t be in right relationship to each other if we can’t see each other. We can’t be fully present in any relationship if we’re walling off part of ourselves or hiding beneath a mask.

M sighed. “It’s really hard to be your best self when you’re in a cage.” They began to tell me about their experiences in seminary before coming out as

nonbinary. “I would find myself getting mad at people for using ‘she/her/hers’ pronouns for me, which wasn’t fair at all, because they didn’t know! I was inhibiting my relationships in order to stay safe. My relationships with others were inhibited, my relationship to myself was deeply inhibited, my relationship to my community was inhibited. I was limited in my ability to live into the image of God within myself.”

After M came out, things started to change. Rather than trying to conform to the current sociological expectations of men and women, M began to express themselves in ways that accurately reflected who they were. They began deconstructing the walls they had built and the masks they had put on, and they took a leap of faith. They allowed others to see what God had always seen.

So how is God’s image manifested in our bodies? In the same way it’s manifested in the rest of our being. The image of God was not given to humankind in bits and pieces, with some living in your left arm and another bit in your soul and another bit in your ability to argue and reason. It is a gift that resonates throughout all that we are, like the deep tones of a bell rung far away. It awakens us and moves us forward toward God and toward each other.

As we talked, M and I agreed that it would be impossible to try to live into the image of God that we bear while we were also trying to deny our gender identity. We had to say yes to who God created us to be before we could begin imaging God in the world. The one had to come before the other, because otherwise our own defenses got in the way. When I asked M how they explained the relationship between this big theological concept and their own gender, they thought for a minute before answering. Finally, M said: “My trans-ness is only related to the image of God in me inasmuch as it allows me to naturally, politically, and morally be in right relationship with myself, with my community, and with creation as a whole. It has nothing to do with it and everything to do with it.”

* M Barclay uses the pronouns “they,” “them,” and “theirs” to help signify their nonbinary identity, rather than “he/him/his” or “she/her/hers.” For more information on “they” as a singular pronoun, check out “Singular ‘They,’” Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/singular-nonbinary-they>.

Biblical Culture Shock

I remember the first time I ever got stopped for being in the wrong bathroom. I was eleven or twelve years old, walking into the women’s bathroom at Disneyland, sporting my favorite blue baseball cap—on backwards, of course. The rest of my family had gone on a ride that I wasn’t particularly interested in, and so I was stopping in by myself to wash my hands and do what everyone else does in these situations. I had barely walked through the door when a woman turned around and stared at me.

“Hey, you’re not supposed to be in here!” she said, in a voice sharp with alarm. I looked around to see whom she was talking to, but she kept staring right at me. Right at the kid with the baggy T-shirt, the sunburnt arms, and the bowl-cut. “This is the ladies room,” she clarified, a bit calmer this time.

“I know!” I said. I wasn’t sure how to explain to her that while I’d never felt much like a lady myself, this was the bathroom that the F on my birth certificate suggested that I use, and the one I’d always used alongside my mom and my sisters.

She just kept staring at me like she didn’t believe what I was saying, and I could feel my stomach start to churn. I turned around quickly and went back out the door, and for the rest of our trip I never went back into a bathroom by myself. Afterward, I felt a tickle of pride that she had thought I was a boy, and the memory made me smile. In the moment, though, I felt terrified.

All over the world people use clothing as part of their gender expression—from kilts in Scotland, to the huipil in Central America, to the gho in Bhutan, to the hijab worn by many Muslim women. We have expectations about what certain kinds of clothing mean in our own culture, and we use that clothing to signal things about ourselves to other people. This isn’t a skill we’re born with, though;

it's something that other people have to teach us. Most of us get a sense of this when we're young. In the United States, adults tell children that pink is for girls, and short hair is for boys. By the time we're in high school, it's not just our parents and teachers who are policing the way we express our gender; our peers are also in on the game. When I met that woman in the bathroom at Disneyland, she was reacting to the stereotypically masculine clothes I was wearing and jumped to some conclusions based on those observations. That wasn't her fault—our brains are made to categorize things quickly—but it's important to note the way that we respond to our knee-jerk reactions. Our unconscious thoughts don't matter as much as what we do about them. But how much can we really tell about someone by the way they dress?

Gender expression was scrutinized in biblical times too, and we have one specific verse that often gets leveraged against people who dress “outside their gender.” That verse is Deuteronomy 22:5: “A woman shall not wear a man’s apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment; for whoever does such things is abhorrent to the LORD your God.” But what exactly is women’s clothing and men’s clothing? Is this verse referring to clothing within one particular culture in one place and time, or is it a hard-and-fast rule for everyone?

The answers to those questions depend on whom you ask. Some biblical scholars believe that Deuteronomy 22:5 was written specifically for the Hebrew people in their time and place, because dressing in the clothes of another gender was associated with the cults of other gods.¹ Other theologians believe this verse to be a continuation of the Torah laws we talked about in the last chapter, where all life is classified and separated into different categories that are forbidden from mixing. In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob suggests that the “man’s apparel” in the verse refers to armor and weapons for war, and that the verse’s original purpose was to keep women from going into battle.² The Jewish scholar Rashi says in his commentary on Deuteronomy 22:5 that the prohibition is against anyone dressing in the clothes of another gender in order to mix among that other gender for the purposes of adultery or some other kind of heterosexual immorality.³ Interestingly enough, Rashi states immediately afterward that he believes the verse applies only to clothing that is used in this way, and suggests that it’s OK to wear the clothing of another gender as long as you’re not using it to sneak off and make out with somebody you shouldn’t.

Regardless of why this verse was written, we have to ask, is it still relevant for us today? Many Christians say no, citing the fact that it’s part of the Mosaic law that Jesus came to fulfill. Additionally, we no longer pay much attention to

the laws in the verses before 22:5 (which command us to help our neighbor's donkey or ox when we see it fallen in the road) or the verses after it (which command that we may never kill a mother bird when we take her eggs, but must always let her go free). Even if we look at other instances of the use of the word for "abomination" in Deuteronomy, we find rules that hardly seem relevant for us, such as Deuteronomy 25:13–16, which says that people who carry two kinds of weights in order to cheat others economically are an abomination. But if we took that rule seriously, perhaps we would be a little harder on people who manipulate the stock market!

Let's say we're going to take Deuteronomy 22:5 at face value and hold to it strictly. We have to ask ourselves if that's possible in an era of global Christianity, where different cultures with contrasting ideas about dress and gender gather together to become the church. Will we demand that all Christian women from Seoul to São Paulo wear sun dresses, or that all Christian men from Mogadishu to Memphis wear a kanzu (the white robe worn by men from eastern Africa)? Will we make space for diversity, or will we try to homogenize everyone into accepting our personal cultural expectations?

We have to ask the same questions about what some Christians call "biblical gender roles." The doctrine that supports biblical gender roles in many evangelical circles today comes from the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), a group formed in 1987 "to set forth the teachings of the Bible about the complementary differences between men and women."⁴ According to the CBMW's founding document, biblical manhood looks like "loving, humble headship," and biblical womanhood looks like "intelligent, willing submission."⁵ Rachel Held Evans, a scholar who attempted to spend a year living out these principles, describes the model this way: "'Biblical submission,' according to the CBMW, requires that women yield to their husbands as the primary breadwinners, defer to them when making decisions on behalf of the family, look to men as the spiritual leaders in the home and church, and avoid pursuing careers that place them in a position of authority over men."⁶ In short, complementarity and biblical gender roles insist that men are created to lead and women are created to follow, and that these two genders are fundamentally different, but must be paired.

The Christians who subscribe to these views cite several biblical passages in support of their argument, one of which can be found in Genesis 2. Here we read another version of the creation story, in which Adam and Eve are created at

different times. In Genesis 1, God creates the first two humans simultaneously, but in Genesis 2:7 we read, “Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” It’s much later in the narrative, when God has already created the garden of Eden, that another human comes on the scene. In Genesis 2:18 God says, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” God brings every created animal to Adam, hoping to find the right mate, but unfortunately Adam is not keen on any of them. Finally, God puts Adam to sleep and takes a piece of his side—usually translated as “rib”—which God makes into Eve. Adam sees Eve for the first time and says, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken” (Gen. 2:23).

When complementarians look at this text, they note that Adam was created first and that Eve is described as a “partner” (“helper” in some translations)—all evidence that women were created to follow.⁷ The problem with seeing women as followers in Genesis 2 is that you could just as easily argue, as many women have, that God goofed up the first prototype in Adam but finally crowned creation with the invention of Eve. In these stories it’s uncertain whether it is better to be created first or last.

Then there’s that word “helper.” Does it really mean that Eve was created as a sort of godly secretary? Rachel Held Evans argues no, and that when you look at the Hebrew words *ezer kenegdo* used to describe Eve, you actually get a much more powerful sense of her purpose. *Ezer*, “helper,” is used in reference to three people or types of people in the Old Testament: twice to refer to Eve, three times to refer to nations that help Israel militarily, and sixteen times to refer to God as the helper of the Hebrew people.⁸ The other part of the phrase, *kenegdo*, essentially means “of the same type”; so, when Adam first sees Eve, his song that affirms her as “flesh of my flesh” is spot-on—they share a special connection as the only two of their kind.

Additionally, some non-LGBTQ+-affirming theologians believe that this splitting of one human into two shows us that men and women are created heterosexual and cisgender, and have a biological and theological imperative to come back together again, sexually and in marriage. Theologian James Brownson takes them to task when he points out that “the Genesis text portrays marriage as a solution, not for ‘incompleteness,’ but for aloneness.”⁹ It’s not Adam’s sex or gender, or lack of those characteristics that causes a problem—it’s the fact that he craves relationship and community. Additionally, rather than

suggesting that Adam and Eve or men and women are created to be different from each other, Brownson points to Adam's recognition of their sameness. He confirms that "the primary movement in the text is not from unity to differentiation, but from the isolation of an individual to the deep blessing of shared kinship and community."

So now that we have a sense of what Christianity has done with gender expression and gender roles, let's take a look at what these heady theoretical ideas actually mean for transgender Christians going about their daily lives.

Aidan Wang is a Taiwanese transgender man from Taipei who thinks of himself as a "third-culture kid." He's spent most of his life with one foot in the Eastern culture of Taiwan and one foot in Christianity—a Western import. When Aidan was in kindergarten, his parents converted to Christianity and began attending a nondenominational evangelical church, and Aidan himself started school at a missionary academy.

Growing up Christian in Taiwan means being part of a true subculture. Only 3.9 percent of the population identify themselves as Christian, while the majority of Taiwanese citizens are practitioners of either Buddhism (35 percent) or Taoism (33 percent).¹⁰ When Aidan started at the Christian academy at around six years old, he experienced a bit of culture shock without ever leaving the country. Gender expectations were different at church than they were at home, and things that never seemed to be a problem before suddenly became complicated.

He smiled for a second when he told me, "I knew my identity [as male] since I was two years old! But growing up Christian meant, back in the day, no mention of transgender people. I had no idea what transgender meant. I knew I started liking girls when I was in third grade, and I learned in school that being gay was a sin, and since I was in a female body and I like girls, I thought I was gay."

While Aidan felt comfortable wearing the clothes he liked at home and around the city, at church there were different expectations. "Outside of the church, people didn't think it was weird that I wore shorts and pants all the time. I would wear dark colors like blue and black. They didn't think it was weird that I cut my hair short. They just thought, 'Oh, cute!'"

I asked him if that was the norm for girls in Taiwan. He responded,

Yes, people here are more androgynous. More gender-blended. There isn't a big distinction between men and women's clothes. There isn't really a women's section or men's section. Well, there is, but people don't really pay attention to that. Men here have smaller frames and less hair growth than men in the West—nobody really has big beards. It's OK for women to have shorter hair and wear sports clothes, flannel shirts, shorts, and things like that. And it's OK for men to wear tighter pants or tighter shirts. So when you walk down the street it's very common for people to not know what your gender is.

But in church things were different. "In the church women are supposed to be more spiritual. They have to be proper; the clothing needs to cover you more. It's OK for girls to wear pants, even in church, but they wanted me to wear more pink. ... I guess just be more feminine. Maybe wear more girlish shirts, more girlish shorts."

The tradition of men's and women's clothing being of similar shapes but varying in color and pattern can actually be found in Taiwanese history, both among the Han people, who migrated to Taiwan from China from the 1600s up to the mid-twentieth century, and among many of the indigenous peoples of the island.¹¹ Customarily both men and women wore robes or full-length wraps with long sleeves, and it was only the color, textile pattern, or kind of needlework that distinguished the two. These days, clothing remains fairly androgynous, but certain colors and styles are more common among one gender than another.

The differences between expectations at home and at church were even more obvious when it came to gender roles. Aidan's mother was an enthusiastic feminist who had a passion for education. "When she was growing up, women were not allowed to be educated," he explained. "She pushed back really hard on that. She's the only person to graduate from college in her family, because she believes women are capable of doing anything." That go-get-'em personality served her well in the academic world, but when she converted to Christianity, she faced the same pressure from so-called biblical gender roles as evangelical women in the United States.

I asked Aidan if "submitting" to men's leadership was hard for his mother. He laughed and said,

Oh yeah. She is always pushing back in church. People would ask my dad to lead a small group and she'd be like, "No, he can't, I will lead."

Like at first she thought, “Oh my, this is the culture? Oh, I should really listen to this Christian culture, I will submit, I will be quiet.” But then, in her nature, she can’t. Because my dad can’t lead—he’s submissive like me. I’m a more passive guy. I don’t talk much, but in church I have to be vocal. I have to lead prayer, I have to be a small group leader. I hated that. I felt a lot of pressure.

This is where the culture clash is most obvious, because while men are expected to lead in church, Taiwanese culture treasures men who are what they call “warm-hearted.”

In Taiwanese culture there’s a pressure on men to be the provider, or, we say, to be able to feed the wife. So if you can’t feed the wife, you can’t get married. As a man you should provide everything your wife needs—everything that makes her happy. If you want to be a good boyfriend, it means you have to carry your girlfriend’s purse, buy her tampons, serve her in any way, listen to her every word, and girls kind of get to boss you around. Guys aspire to this. We have a term for it—it’s called “warm man.” Like you’re warm-hearted. We want to be the warm man. It goes along with the motto “happy wife, happy life.” So then I think a lot of women are uncomfortable in church because of that, because they’re called to submit, right? They have to be submissive. I think that’s where the pushback is—it’s totally different for us.

Examples like the ones Aidan brings up should make us take a critical look at the principles and behaviors that Christianity is imposing on people around the world. While there are certain parts of Christian belief that aren’t relative—like the Ten Commandments or Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount—cultural components might need to be evaluated differently. Should we be insisting that cultural practices and rules created for one people at one specific place and time be the rule of law for all people, forever?

It’s telling that we have some pretty great examples of biblical characters who didn’t fit the gender mold, even in their own time. Think about Joseph, for instance—the one with the “technicolor dream coat.” As it turns out, that coat may be more than it appears.

Here’s the set-up for Joseph’s story:

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

(Genesis 37:2–4)

You might notice that this Bible translation, the New Revised Standard Version, calls Joseph's coat "a long robe with sleeves," rather than the "coat of many colors" that we find in the King James Version. The truth is that we don't know exactly how to translate the Hebrew words *ketonet passim*, which are used to describe this piece of clothing, because this combination is used only twice in the whole Bible. Most of the time translators can figure out a word's meaning by looking closely at the context, especially if the word is used often. When a word is hardly ever used, though, we lose some of the nuance. If you are reading a collection of children's stories that reference a stuffed bear with a fondness for honey who lives in a forest with an owl, a rabbit, a donkey, and a pig, those words by themselves don't evoke anything—unless you've already read the stories of Winnie the Pooh! We know that the Hebrew word *ketonet* means "garment, robe, or tunic," because we see it used all over the Bible to refer to clothing. But we don't know what the word *passim* means. The only other time we find this word is in the terrible story of Tamar, King David's daughter, who was sexually assaulted by David's son Amnon in 2 Samuel 13. Verse 18 tells us that Tamar "was wearing a long robe with sleeves; for this is how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed in earlier times." Apparently this piece of clothing that Tamar was wearing had both gender and status connotations attached to it.

So what are we to make of the fact that this garment, the *ketonet passim*, is worn by only two people in the Bible: Joseph, and Princess Tamar? Theologians have been chewing this one over for hundreds of years and coming up with all kinds of answers. Some believe that the outfit must really be a gender-neutral children's garment (but how do we understand the gender and status explanation in Tamar's story then?), while others think that maybe men's and women's royal robes were so similar as to be indistinguishable (but then why the fuss over properly gendered clothing in Deut. 22:5?). In the end, all we know for sure is

that “this apparently beautiful and luxurious garment that serves as a mark of distinction for the virgin daughters of the king is the same garment with which the patriarch vested his favored son.”¹² If this is the case, the alienation and abuse Joseph receives at the hands of his brothers makes even more sense. As a person assigned male at birth but who dresses in clothes associated with women, Joseph fails to measure up to expected gender expressions.

We see another gender rebel in the form of Deborah, the female leader of the Hebrew people during a period in which the Israelites were slaves to the king of Canaan. Judges 4:4–5 tells us, “At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment.” One day Deborah called a man named Barak to visit her. When he came to hear her prophecy, she told him that God had chosen him to lead a band of Israelite warriors against the Canaanite king’s most powerful general, Sisera. Barak thought about it for a minute. If he won, he would secure freedom for the Israelites, but if he lost, his people would probably be oppressed further. Eventually he said, “If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go” (Judg. 4:8).

Scholars disagree about whether Barak refused to go without Deborah because he was scared, or because he realized it would be wise to bring along a prophet who is in touch with God, to keep the battle on track. In either case, Deborah responded by saying, “I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman” (Judg. 4:9). And so she went with him, along with ten thousand warriors, out onto the battlefield itself. Deborah advised Barak and told him when the time was right to attack. When the fight was over, Sisera the Canaanite general was the only opposing soldier left alive.

Sisera ran from the battlefield, right past the tent of a woman named Jael. Somehow Jael recognized who he was, and she invited him into the tent to hide. Sisera asked her for a drink, and then asked her to keep a lookout and to tell anyone looking for him that he hadn’t come that way. Jael agreed, but as soon as the exhausted Sisera fell asleep, she picked up a sharp tent peg and drove it right through his temple, killing him instantly. Barak ran up to the tent, hot on Sisera’s trail, and Jael flagged him down and led him to Sisera’s body, thereby fulfilling Deborah’s prophecy that God would give the final victory to a woman. And not just one victory, but a triumph that would secure the Israelites’ freedom! In

Judges 5 Deborah and Barak together compose a song retelling the whole story and thanking God for their liberation.

Both Jael and Deborah do some unladylike things in these chapters, from leading and directing a battle to killing a high-ranking military officer with just the tools at hand. When looking specifically at Deborah, one scholar notes, “Her gender is stressed almost disproportionately at the beginning of ch. 4”—by referring to her as both a female prophet and a wife—“and she describes herself as a mother in ch. 5. But what other characteristics make her female according to the androcentric society’s designation of what is female? She is not the caring mother, rather a mother who is a military commander. She is a prophet, judge and a leader, all of which are traditional male traits.”¹³

Would Deborah pass the test of biblical womanhood, as defined by Christian complementarians? If these heroic biblical characters who spoke with God and liberated thousands don’t fit the criteria, who can?

Western Christianity has had a significant effect on Taiwan, despite the small number of practicing Christians who live there. In May 2017, Taiwan became the first Asian territory to recognize same-sex marriage, but this victory for LGBTQ+ Taiwanese didn’t come easily. Resistance to same-sex marriage had been coming from Taiwanese Christians since the late 1990s and had grown steadily over time as the issue became more prominent in Western churches. One group, the Alliance of Religious Groups for the Love of Families Taiwan, organized a protest in November 2013 that included thousands of people who opposed any pro-LGBTQ+ legislation.

Chen Chih-hung, the Alliance’s spokesperson at the time, believed that it was up to Christians to educate Taiwan’s other faith groups on the dangers of homosexuality. Chen explained,

Christian groups take the lead on this issue since Asian religions haven’t traditionally seen homosexuality as a big deal. Churches in the U.S. and Europe have confronted the impact of gay marriage directly. ... Since only a small percentage of Taiwanese are Christians, we share what we know with other religions so that they understand the seriousness of the situation. ... Christian churches in Taiwan are informed by churches abroad about what gay activists have been doing here. ... We lack experience. They have told us how serious the issue is and what strategies [gay rights advocates] deploy.¹⁴

Perhaps, unsurprisingly, groups like Chen's Alliance are supported by conservative evangelical groups in the United States in terms of both knowledge and resources. Two US-based organizations, Focus on the Family and the World Congress of Families, have branches in Taiwan and Hong Kong that seek to effect church communities and legislation.¹⁵

Aidan has experienced firsthand this new focus on anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes in churches. After he medically transitioned several years ago, he decided to find a church that he thought might welcome him. "I started going to this church that I liked, and right at the beginning I told my pastor about my identity. I told him I'm transgender and asked if he's OK with that. And at the time he had no idea—he had never met a transgender person before. Never heard of it! The only thing he shared was that he was not gay-affirming, and since I'm a man and I'm heterosexual, he had no problem at the time. He welcomed me, and I stayed at that church for five years."

The problems began when Aidan started seriously dating a woman. The two of them would go to church together on Sundays, and suddenly it seemed as if the pastor wasn't as friendly anymore. "I think he was caught up in the whole marriage--equality fight that was happening at the time. I think that made him stop and think about it, consider it, and decide that he's not OK with me being transgender. He kind of tightened his view on what was OK and what's not, so originally it was OK to be trans but not OK to be gay. Then it became not OK to be either."

"How did you know he wasn't OK with it?" I asked.

"They pressured me to stay celibate, and I didn't think that was a fair expectation on me," Aidan laughed and went on:

It was a very evangelical, charismatic church, so what they did was tell me, "The Lord told me in a dream. I saw a vision in my dream, and I saw the Lord stamping the word 'celibacy' on your forehead, and he specifically told me that I ought to tell you." That kind of thing. No mention of Scripture or anything, no talking through—it's just their vision, their dream.

At the time, being the submissive person I am, I didn't fight back. I panicked, in my heart, but then I thought, oh no, this is just a misunderstanding. I'm sure these people love me, they care for me, and there's a way to talk through this. So I didn't say anything at the time. But then over the next few weeks I sent them articles, you know, like,

just things to let them read and consider, but it didn't help. Every Sunday after that I would show up, but I could see very clearly the pastor going to my girlfriend and whispering in her ear. So then afterward I would ask her, "What did they tell you?" And she would tell me they said things like "We're praying for you." "We're worried about you." And, "Remember what the Lord says!" Stuff like that.

This pressure and prospect of losing either his church community, or his girlfriend, or both, caused a lot of mental anguish for Aidan. On top of that, there was always the tiny voice of doubt in the back of his head whispering, "What if they're right about you?"

I struggled with hell for the longest time while I was at that church, because that's what my girlfriend was concerned about. Hell. She was concerned about going to hell for dating me. So then we started having so many conversations about that that I got scared, and my pastors didn't help, you know. They were seeing all these visions! And I panicked so much about going to hell. That was always in the back of my mind growing up, and it just got worse.

Eventually, Aidan left that church, and he and his girlfriend broke up. He started thinking more critically about some of the things he'd learned in his time at Christian schools, and about the things his nonaffirming pastor had said. He began reading dozens of books and articles about gender identity, faith, and the Bible, trying to find a way to put the pieces back together again. When it came down to it, though, the trauma that he had been living through, while being told over and over again that he was inherently wrong and bound to an eternal punishment, became too much to bear.

"How would you describe your faith now?" I asked him. "Honestly, I think it's amazing that you'd have any left after those experiences."

Aidan smiled again, sadly this time. "What it came down to was that some days I have to believe that hell just doesn't exist. Other days I believe that if Jesus came to save us, he came to save all of us, and even if hell does exist, he loves us too much to let us suffer forever."

"If two-years-ago me saw me right now, he would freak out! He would not believe I'm like this. Because ... I'm gonna be a bit emotional about this." He gulped and looked down.

I remember what it was like to be me two years ago. God was everything. ... And for me to be me now, when my relationship with God feels like nothing sometimes? I'm still kind of struggling with that. I'm still trying to make sense of what's going on. But it feels so much better than being terrified all the time. Maybe I'll be able to go back some day. But I was a trans Christian in the church for eight years. And as a trans Christian out of church right now, I just can't believe how I lived through that.

He sighed. "It's kind of a miracle."

What's My Name Again?

When I was born, in the late 1980s, my parents decided to gift me with what they thought was an original and beautiful name: Alison.* As it turned out, Alison—or one of the various alternate spellings—made it into the top fifty names for girls that year and for a couple of years afterward. From middle school on, whenever I'd walk into a new class, it seemed as if at least two more Alisons would crop up, and we'd all be forced to either pick nicknames or go by our last names instead. I was never into shortening my name, because I thought Ali sounded even girlier than Alison did. But then one day my uncle Rick dropped by our house. He'd come over to help mow the lawn, and I was out dribbling a basketball in our driveway. He walked across the yard to the house, and as he did, he yelled, "Hey, Al!" I remember looking up and waving and thinking to myself, "Yes! He gets it!" He was the only person to ever call me Al, but every time he did it, he made me feel two inches taller.

Names are incredibly powerful things. Whether given or chosen, our first name identifies us as an individual, and our last name identifies us as part of a community. For transgender people, names can take on an additional sense of meaning. They become another way in which we express our gender. Some trans folks choose to keep the name they were given at birth, especially if that name is gender-neutral, like Robin, Taylor, or Jamie. But sometimes the name we were given at birth just doesn't fit, and we decide to choose a new name altogether—something that gives other people a better sense of who we are.

Renaming is as old as language, and we have some fascinating cases woven right into our foundational biblical texts. In these scriptural examples, a new name is given in recognition of an identity somebody already has, or the new name is given to recognize a change in identity.

In Numbers 13 we find an example of someone being given a new name to illustrate a new identity. Moses and the wandering Hebrew people find themselves on the doorstep to the Promised Land, but they're not sure what to do next. God tells Moses to send out some spies to do a bit of reconnaissance, to see what kind of people already live here. Moses chooses one leader from each tribe to go out and look around, among them a young man named Hoshea son of Nun. Verse 16 tells us, "And Moses changed the name of Hoshea son of Nun to Joshua." We're not explicitly told why Moses changes his name, but Joshua does become Moses' second in command and eventually takes his place as leader after Moses' death. In the Middle Ages a French rabbi named Samuel ben Meir—better known as Rashbam—suggested that it was customary to give a new name to somebody who had moved up to such a high rank,¹ and so it's very possible that Moses decided to bestow the new name and the new title at the same time, essentially gifting Joshua with a new identity.

While most names in the Hebrew Scriptures are gifted from one human to another, or from God to human, there is a single case of a person giving God the Creator a new name. This distinction goes to Hagar, the slave of Abraham and Sarah, who becomes pregnant with Abraham's son and then runs away to escape Sarah's mistreatment. Hagar meets an angel of God in the wilderness in Genesis 16; the angel assures her that God is with her and her unborn son. Verse 13 says, "So she named the LORD who spoke to her, 'You are El-roi'; for she said, 'Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?'" *El-roi* in Hebrew means "God sees" or "one who sees." In this case, Hagar is not changing God's identity; she's giving a new name to recognize the identity that God already has.

One of the most famous name changes in the New Testament is found in the Gospel of Matthew:

[Jesus] said to [the disciples], "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

(Matthew 16:15–18)

Usually, when we read this passage, we pick up right away on what Jesus has done. He has given Simon a new name. What we might miss at first, though, is

that Simon has just renamed Jesus as well! In the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the idea that Jesus is the Messiah—the anointed one—is a bit of a secret, and this particular account is the very first time that anyone dares to call Jesus the Messiah out loud. What Simon does, when he’s asked about Jesus’ identity, is give Jesus the name that recognizes who he already is. Simon’s declaration does not make Jesus the Messiah; it just recognizes it formally. In the opposite way, when Jesus tells Simon, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church,” Jesus is also giving Peter a whole new identity as the foundation of the community.

When a transgender person changes their name, they often work within these same categories: either taking on a name that highlights something true and established about their personality and their connection to others, or embracing a name that shows the world how they’ve changed and who they aspire to be.

River Hammond’s* name came to them one day while they were walking along the banks of the Upper Iowa River. “I wanted to keep my initials, so I wanted a name that started with R, and I wanted something that was gender-neutral and could be very ambiguous if I ever needed it to be,” they explained when I asked about their name’s origin. “When I was in college I lived near the Upper Iowa River, and I would walk the trail multiple times a day and pray and think. I was just known for being associated with the river. And one day I was like, ‘River, that’s a nice R word. It could be a name. It could totally be a name!’ And then it was a name!”

But for River, finding a name was one of the easier parts of coming out as trans. They grew up as the only child of a Southern Baptist missionary father and a mother who was physically and mentally ill. Their early childhood was spent moving from place to place within North America. “We sort of lived a nomadic lifestyle, going from call to call to call,” they said, thinking back. “When I was twelve, we went through a period of homelessness, and that was the first time that I knew something was different about me. Like, I knew something was up. I didn’t have words—I didn’t have anything—but I knew something was different. And that was the first time my mother asked me if I was gay.”

The question caught River off guard, and they experienced a moment of recognition and intense fear. “I knew that at a certain level that was language I might use for myself one day, but I knew that I couldn’t then, because I wouldn’t be safe.”

When River was in their senior year of college, though, the hiding became too much. By the time graduation rolled around, River found themselves living through a complex personal trauma and trying to deal with coming out at the same time. They sighed heavily when I asked about their family's reaction. "I came out for the first time to my parents as a gay man, and all hell broke loose. It was a hellish nightmare. I was kicked out of my home church, and I was kicked out of my house for about three weeks to a month."

Leaving home was a big deal for River, who had been homeschooled up until college, so that they could continue their education while moving around, and so that they could serve as primary caregiver for their mother. Several years later, when they followed their call to ministry and began attending seminary, River found themselves living with a group of men in the seminary's provided housing. Since they had never had siblings and had never lived in shared housing with other men before, this provided another opportunity to think deeply about both sexuality and gender. "And I realized, oh my gosh, I'm not gay! Because there's something very different about these guys that I just do not get!" But if sexuality didn't explain that difference, what could it be? River did some research, and by the end of first semester they were trying out different pronouns and names and attempting to understand how their awareness and experiences differed from the cisgender people around them. In August, at the end of that first summer in seminary, they began to piece together some answers. It was then, too, that River found their name.

Not all transgender people find the right name right away. In fact, lots of trans folks find themselves in the same position their parents once held—scouring baby books, making lists, and saying names out loud to see how they sound. You might end up trying out two or three names before you find one that sticks. Those who want to illustrate an established piece of their personality may make a previous nickname more formal. Other trans folks want to solidify their ties to their family and community and may scan the family tree for names that seem to fit, or if it's possible, they'll ask their parents what other names were considered when they were born. Many people pick a characteristic—either one that describes them currently or that describes who they hope to be—and find names that hold that meaning in another language, like Asher, which means "happy," or Valencia, which means "brave." You might even pick the name of a favorite fictional character with whom you have identified strongly or some of whose personal attributes you admire!

One of the most common ways of changing a name, both in the Bible and for trans folks today, is to change the spelling of the birth name slightly so that it sounds similar but has a slightly different connotation or meaning. For instance, you might change your name from Bobbi to Bobby, from Mason to Madison, or from Emily to Emile. There's a great example of this kind of slight name tweaking in Genesis when God renames Abraham and Sarah:

Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations." ... God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

(Genesis 17:3–5, 15–16)

Even though Abram did not have any children with his wife Sarai prior to this point, his birth name meant "exalted father," which probably felt like a painful irony. When God changes his name, though, he becomes Abraham, which means "father of many." God hands him not only a new name, but a new identity and a new promise. The change in spelling from Sarai to Sarah doesn't change the basic meaning of her name—Sarah means "-princess"—but the fact that God gives Sarah a new name means that God intentionally gives the new identity and blessing to both Abraham and Sarah equally. As we find out later in their story, the covenant God makes with Abraham is null and void if Sarah is not included.

When we look at stories of renaming in the Bible, we often find that a character is handed a new name they never asked for. While I'm sure Abraham treasured the new name and promise God gave him, and while Peter probably felt honored in the moment Jesus proclaimed him the bedrock of the church, not everybody comes by their new name so easily. Some people have to fight for it.

Jacob and Esau were Abraham and Sarah's twin grandsons. Even before he was born, Jacob, the younger twin, was a known troublemaker. Genesis 25 tells us that when the first twin was born, he was covered in downy baby hair, and so his parents named him Esau, which means "hairy." The second twin was born immediately afterward, holding on to his brother's heel, so his parents named

him Jacob, which can be translated “one who holds the heel,” which in turn suggests another meaning, “usurper.” Up into his young adulthood Jacob was trying to outdo his older brother. While Esau was strong, Jacob was smart and sly as a fox. Eventually Jacob got his brother to sell him the inheritance that Esau should have inherited as the firstborn son, and tricked their father into giving him the family blessing that went with it. Jacob was driven away from home by the fear that Esau might try to kill him in order to get back the inheritance and the blessing.

Years later, God told an older and more mature Jacob to return to his family. Jacob was incredibly afraid, but he packed up his new household—made up of livestock, servants, two wives, and many children—and headed back home. On the last night before the convoy was set to meet Esau, Jacob decided to split up the caravan, sending gifts ahead to sweeten up Esau, and sending the women and children off in another group to safeguard them against retribution. Jacob decided to spend the night by himself—or so he thought.

So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.” But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” The man asked him, “What is your name?” “Jacob,” he answered. Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.” Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.” But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.” The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

(Genesis 32:24–31 NIV)

Jacob’s new name—Israel—is a tricky one for translators, but it’s most often interpreted as “one who has striven with God,” or “one who has struggled with God and persevered.” This imagery—this wrestling with God and humans—is incredibly familiar to transgender Christians who have spent a portion of their life grappling with their faith and their gender. Sometimes we have to fight to have our gender recognized, and sometimes we fight to be seen as Christians, and sometimes it feels as if we’re just holding on to God with both hands and

refusing to let go until God gives us something. That hunger and thirst for righteousness, for justice, for blessing, and for grace can leave us ecstatic when we finally receive it, but it can also leave us limping.

It's been three years now since River received their new name, and many of their family members still won't use it. "My mother called me River for the first time a couple of months ago. My father still won't call me River. Because of his religious background he just ... can't. He won't call me a name—he'll just point at me."

This isn't unusual for Christian parents who don't know how to respond when their child comes out as transgender. If they've been told that being transgender is against God's will, they may feel torn between their faith and their love for their child. In these cases Christian parents and their trans children are wrestling in almost exactly the same fight. Both are struggling to understand how to honor God and love themselves and each other at the same time. Parents may start to use their child's birth name more often because it reminds them of a time when their kid was younger and things felt less complicated, but this can lead to the transgender person feeling as if their parents either can't really see them or doesn't care about who their child is as a flesh-and-blood human being. At other times parents may use a trans person's birth name to make a point about their own disapproval, but this just triggers another flight-or-flight response in their child which can end in harsh words, or even the loss of the relationship all together.

These kinds of reactions from parents make transgender people feel as if they have to make a nuisance of themselves just to be heard, and sometimes it can be almost as bad with friends and siblings. When I asked River about how friends and extended family reacted, they said,

Well, I'm only in contact with two of the friends I had before transition, so I think that speaks volumes about how hard it was for the people in the Christian circles I was raised in. I had to turn into an unpleasant person for a while to get people to honor my name, so there's a lot of tension there. I had to spend about three months getting really cranky with people about using my name, but at that point they realized it was important, and some people started honoring it, which I really appreciated.

After this initial struggle River was able to gather a group of new, supportive

friends who helped them hold a sort of funeral for their birth name. They gathered on the shore of Lake Michigan one weekend, and each person wrote down their memories of River's birth name on scraps of paper. After each memory was read aloud, River burned the pieces of paper. "One of my friends talked about the joy that she felt when she heard my old name," River remembers. "Another friend wrote about when she first met me. Another person wrote about important people in her life who have that same name. I got to hear the memories, and I got to burn them up, and I get to let them be memories that I can choose to take with me if I want to, but I don't have to. It was a very powerful ceremony, for me."

Trans folks can't realistically expect people to turn on a dime and start using a new name or new set of pronouns without any practice, but the best thing friends and family members can do to show support is to make a concerted effort. Sure, you'll slip up occasionally—maybe more often than not in the beginning. Just apologize quickly and try again next time. As the old saying goes, when it comes to the gift of a new name, it's the thought that counts.

Using a transgender person's chosen name rather than their birth name shows basic respect, as well as demonstrating that you believe them to be who they say they are. If a cisgender person came into a business meeting and introduced herself as Evelyn Smith, you wouldn't turn around and say, "Welcome, Evie!" nor would you greet the new person in church with a name tag that says "Ted" with "Good to see you, Edward! Ted is short for Edward, right?" Using a transgender person's birth name—unless you've asked them for special permission -beforehand—can feel invalidating at best and malicious or even dangerous at worst, since the use of someone's birth name might out them as transgender and put them in harm's way.

River is currently working toward ordination in the Metropolitan Community Church, a Protestant denomination that was founded in the late 1960s specifically to include LGBTQ+ people, and is passionate about the intersection of faith, transgender identity, and mental illness. I asked them whether they found labels like "transgender" or "mentally ill" or even specific names to be helpful or hurtful. In response, River told me about a recent experience they'd had when they checked themselves into a hospital because of a problem with their medication.

After being diagnosed with a bipolar disorder, River had been prescribed a medication that was supposed to help regulate the mania and depression, but

within a week the meds had induced a hypermanic state that left them unable to cope. River laughed a little as they explained, “I completely lost control, and I decided on the spur of the moment that I needed to dye my hair blue, but on the way to the store to buy the hair dye I kept thinking, ‘I should drive into that concrete embankment.’” River made it back home safe, and was in the middle of dyeing their hair when a friend called. “I picked up, and somehow, thanks be to God, she made me stay on the phone until I found someone who could get me to the hospital.”

Once at the hospital, though, River faced other problems. “I was finally admitted around midnight, and when I woke up the next morning I was woken up to a name that was not my own, and referred to with the wrong pronouns. I was told that because that’s what it said on my driver’s license and birth certificate, that’s what they had to use.” (Hospitals and clinics do not have to use the name and gender marked on your legal documents, and health-care best practices recommend always having a place on intake forms to note both a person’s gender identity and their chosen name.)²

“I had to fight for three days, and every time I saw that name, I had to erase it and replace it. It was not a fun, happy encounter. There was one person in the hospital who was good at honoring my name, and that was because she was queer and the spouse of a trans person, so she was helpful in educating the staff and doing the work that I couldn’t necessarily do as a patient there.” River took a deep breath and added, “If she hadn’t been there, I would not have made it.”

As a person who is transgender and living with a mental illness, River knows that words have a huge potential for both harm and healing. People can choose to use River’s birth name and cause frustration and anxiety, or people can choose to call River the name they prayed over, meditated on, and eventually embraced; and that can lead to a stronger and safer relationship. In the same way, River pointed out that labels like “mentally ill” and even “transgender” can be used both positively and negatively. Both of those labels carry social stigma and can be used to write someone off as a weirdo—as someone not worthy of respect, care, or love. On the other hand, personally claiming a label means that it will be easier to find other people like you, and to find the resources you need to live a healthy, happy life. In some cases, the struggle for a name or a label becomes so emblematic that it creates a community that hadn’t existed before. Think of Jacob and the way he embraced his new name, Israel, which would signify his descendants for thousands of years to come.

That same struggle for a name, and for survival, endures today for many trans folks. As River put it,

There's something very powerful about living with mental illness and having my trans experience, because both of those things make it incredibly difficult to stay alive. And there's something powerful about claiming it and saying, "Yeah, this is part of me, and I get to live with it." There's power in naming that, because it gives you resources to draw upon. It gives you community, it gives you different places to look for and find things, and it gives you the ability to honor your experience in ways that are life-giving.

* A note for trans allies: I'm sharing my birth name with you here because I don't mind sharing my story! Remember, though, that it's never polite or appropriate to ask a trans person what their birth name was. If they feel comfortable enough with you to volunteer that information, they'll do it in their own time and in their own way.

* I've changed River's last name here for their safety, and at their request. Like M Barclay, River uses the pronouns "they," "them," and "their."

God Breaks the Rules to Get You In

In mid-November 2013 I stumbled across a piece of Scripture that changed my life. I was twenty-five years old at the time, starting my second year of work for a master's degree in biblical studies, and just beginning the process of coming out as transgender. On the one hand, I felt a sense of relief at finally facing something I'd been running from for so long. On the other, now that I had internally admitted this truth about myself, I felt as if I was harboring a dangerous secret. The happiness I felt at making some sense of my own inner workings was quickly overshadowed by the potential for crisis that hovered over every conversation with my parents.

In fact, part of the reason it had taken me so long to admit that I felt decisively male was because I was terrified of telling my family. I knew that telling them I was trans would be hard on my dad's belief system and on my mom's fears for my safety. The idea of putting my parents through the wringer by explaining that I wanted to begin hormone therapy right away seemed mean, somehow. It would push them into a world where friends and family members would train the spotlight on their parenting skills and ask why their firstborn couldn't just fit in the body God had given her.

I knew that, if I told them I was trans, these conversations were going to be part of our new reality. We would be asked to explain how my trans identity fit into our faith, and that was something I didn't have an answer for yet. In my heart, my relationship with God hadn't changed, because I hadn't really changed. In coming out to myself as transgender, all I was doing was acknowledging something that had been part of me for as long as I could remember—a part that had never interfered with my faith before. I had grown up singing "Jesus Loves Me" and internalizing the message that God knew me better than I knew myself.

I thought that if these things had been true my whole life and if I'd experienced these gendered feelings that whole time, then God's love and my trans identity could not possibly be mutually exclusive.

But I still had this tickle in the back of my mind—an echo of conservative theology I'd internalized growing up—which whispered that it was fine if my gender was a little bit unconventional, as long as I didn't attempt to do anything about it. It sounded and felt very much like the messages I had received as a teenager when I came out as bisexual: God still loves you, but don't act on those feelings—or else. That meant hormone therapy and surgery were out of the question, as were changing my name or my pronouns.

As a student of biblical texts, I had found only one verse that had anything to say about changing one's body in relation to one's physical sex characteristics. Deuteronomy 23:1 commands, “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD.” I had to wonder whether this verse was meant as a prohibition against any kind of bodily modification of sex characteristics, or whether it was meant to be read plainly—as a constraint placed solely on people with those particular reproductive organs. If it was the latter, what did that mean for transgender women who chose to remove penis and testicles during gender-confirmation surgery? Regardless, this lone verse seemed to set a troubling precedent.

I had a lot to work through as I tried to imagine the ways in which my faith might intersect with my newly understood transgender identity. Because I had what I believed was a strong relationship with God, and because my gender identity was just a fact, my question was not, “Do I have to choose between my gender identity and my faith?” Instead, I found myself asking, “Is it possible to fully embrace both parts of my identity and still be welcomed into Christian community?”

Over Thanksgiving break that same year, I found myself scrambling to pick a topic for my master's thesis. One evening I grabbed my Bible off the top of a stack of schoolbooks, planning to scan through several of my favorite passages and hoping to find something intriguing. I sat down on the floor next to my bookshelf and plopped the large study Bible, complete with extensive notes and highlighting, down in front of me.

As a kid, I remember treating the Bible like a Magic 8-Ball. Our pastor said all answers could be found in Scripture, so I'd squeeze my eyes shut tight, open it to a random page, stick my finger down, and then open my eyes to see what

God had to say about my particular circumstance. The best part was that if I didn't like or understand the answer, I'd just run the whole process over again!

I hadn't tried anything like that in more than a decade, but on this particular night I balanced the cover of the big book between my palms and let it fall open on its own. Thump. Right smack in the middle of the page on the right-hand side, Isaiah 56:3–8 floated slowly off the page and into my heart:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
 “The LORD will surely separate me from his people”;
and do not let the eunuch say,
 “I am just a dry tree.”
For thus says the LORD:
To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
 who choose the things that please me
 and hold fast my covenant,
I will give, in my house and within my walls,
 a monument and a name
 better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
 that shall not be cut off.
And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
 to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,
 and to be his servants,
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
 and hold fast my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
 and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
 will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
 for all peoples.
Thus says the Lord GOD,
 who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
 besides those already gathered.

I was floored. I could swear I had never heard these verses before in my life, despite having read through the book of Isaiah for a class only the year before. I felt an immediate connection to the eunuch and the foreigner. Their fear of separation, fear of being forgotten, fear of being kept out of God's family—all based on identities as unchosen as the place of their birth and as intrinsic as the shape of their body. Their fears were my fears too. Yet here was God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, quieting those fears and promising an unequivocal welcome.

The next day I walked into my thesis adviser's office with my Bible and asked him if I could write about Isaiah 56:1–8. I had to know, was there a direct connection between the experiences of eunuchs in the ancient world and transgender people today? Could this text be interpreted as a call for a full welcome for gender minorities?

Before I could begin to answer these questions, I required a bit of context. As it turned out, there was a link between Deuteronomy 23:1—the verse about modification of genitalia—and the text from Isaiah that I was now exploring.

The book of Isaiah itself was created over a period of about two centuries, beginning during the late eighth century BCE.¹ Because it was written over such a long period of time, and because of the stylistic cues and historical references in the text, we know it was written and compiled by at least three people—though we refer to all of them as Isaiah. At the time of First Isaiah, the original united kingdom of Israel that we remember from the stories of King David had been split up into two separate kingdoms called Israel and Judah. First Isaiah lived in the kingdom of Judah; in his writings, which span from chapter 1 to chapter 39, we find histories, prophecies, and some incredibly colorful warnings to the leaders of both kingdoms. Isaiah 1:2–3 opens the book this way:

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth;
for the LORD has spoken:
I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.
The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib;
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.

Not a very auspicious beginning. Israel and Judah were, at the time, very powerful kingdoms with a large wealth disparity. They also had a tendency to go to war against neighboring kingdoms, unprovoked, in the hope of gaining more resources. First Isaiah warned the people of Israel and Judah that God was not pleased with the way things were going and that, if they continued to abandon the oppressed, cheat widows, abuse orphans, and generally pervert justice for the most vulnerable in their society, God would release a terrible vengeance on the two communities and on their land.

Neither Israel nor Judah paid much attention to First Isaiah's warnings, and God's people were attacked and ravaged first by the Assyrian Empire and then by the Babylonian Empire. Family members were intentionally split up and taken away as slaves, rulers were imprisoned or killed, homes were burned, and the temple—God's holy resting place, built by King Solomon, and home of the ark of the covenant—was demolished.

This is where the next Isaiah figure came in. Second Isaiah wrote from chapter 40 to chapter 55 and spoke tenderly to the people who were then enslaved in Babylon. You may recognize the opening words to the Israelites in Isaiah 40:1–2:

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

Second Isaiah was the one to announce the light at the end of the tunnel. He related God's promise to take care of the people, to make a way for them to return home and to rebuild. Second Isaiah foretold that the Persian king Cyrus would overthrow Babylon and allow the Israelites to return home, and this is exactly what happened beginning in the year 538 BCE.

Finally, in the last thirty years of the sixth century, the people of Israel and Judah began coming out of Babylon and returning to their homeland. It's during this time that Third Isaiah started writing. The final section of the book of Isaiah, beginning in chapter 56, contains his work, which tends to bounce frantically

from comfort and encouragement to frustration and disapproval, like a babysitter saddled with the care of too many toddlers. This was not far from the truth, since in many ways the people of Israel had to start life all over again upon their return. Third Isaiah was the prophet sent to guide the people through the process of rebirth and rebuilding.

Back home, the Israelites were immediately stumped by the lack of a temple. Where were sacrifices supposed to take place? How and when and where should the temple be rebuilt? Who should take on the priestly duties for the people, now that many of the families who had passed the task from generation to generation had been wiped out? With the number of Israelites drastically reduced, were laws against intermarriage with other cultures still binding? Furthermore, no one knew what to do with the Israelite men who had been castrated in the courts of the Babylonians and the Persians. Wasn't there a verse somewhere in the Torah that forbade them from being part of the community?

Hebrew Bible scholar Joseph Blenkinsopp tells us that “castration was not practiced in Israel, either for court and harem officials, or as a judicial punishment.”² In contrast, Israel's neighbors—who became Assyria, Babylon, and Persia—all used castration for various purposes. Sometimes it served as penalty for a crime or marked someone as a slave for life. Eunuchs were also created in order to form a group of people considered neither male nor female—people who could move easily between gendered spaces. Once Israelite and Judean captives were taken as slaves, many were castrated and put into service in the Babylonian courts, which provided a new problem for the Israelite community upon return. If Deuteronomy 23:1 did indeed prohibit eunuchs from entering into the assembly of the Lord, how could these marginalized people be reintegrated into the new society?

But Deuteronomy 23 didn't stop at prohibitions against eunuchs. It went on to describe each of the ethnic groups that were off-limits to Israelites when it came to marriage. Realistically, during these decades of exile many of God's people had found love and created families wherever possible. What should be done about these families now? Rebuilding a nation would hardly be feasible with the small number of “pure” Israelite descendants left. The way to renewal appeared to be blocked at every turn by God's own law. The people needed a way forward.

Into this impossible situation, God spoke an unprecedented word of inclusion:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
“The LORD will surely separate me from his people”;
and do not let the eunuch say,
“I am just a dry tree.”

(Isaiah 56:3)

It was hard for me to explain initially why I felt such an immediate connection to the eunuch in Isaiah’s passage. In terms of cultural experience, our lives could not have been more different. I had no idea what it felt like to be taken away from your family and your home; to be forced into slavery; then to have your body modified against your will. But there were elements of the story of the eunuch’s return to Israel that I did recognize: becoming unwelcome in your community of faith, for example.

In fact, eunuchs in the ancient world found themselves in many of the same kinds of in-between spaces that transgender people often experience today. Historically, eunuchs were keepers of the king’s harem, charged with looking after the many wives that any given king might have banded together. They were trusted with this duty specifically because there was no chance that a eunuch would impregnate anyone and cause trouble with the legitimacy of the royal line. They were allowed into female-only spaces because they posed no threat to men or to their paternity. Eunuchs also acted as court advisers and were allowed into spaces specifically reserved for men, though they weren’t considered men themselves. They lived in limbo between genders, caught somewhere on the social ladder a few rungs below men and a couple of steps above women.

In the Babylonian and Persian Empires this liminal gender state was not considered a problem, but back home among the Israelites, anything that couldn’t be categorized was suspect. Strict boundaries were the backbone of Israelite law—encoded in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy—and prohibitions were placed on things like clothing made of mixed fibers and fields planted with two kinds of crops. Eunuchs did not have a place in Israelite society. They were neither fish nor fowl.

In Leviticus 21:16–21, Moses is told that descendants of Aaron—those of the priestly family—must not have any physical blemish and must not have crushed testicles, if they are to be admitted to serve in the temple. This strikes all eunuchs from the list of possible clergy. Then in Deuteronomy 23:1 we see the eunuchs forbidden from “the assembly of the LORD” as well, which may have been interpreted as expulsion from places of worship, or may have been a broad

stroke that ousted them from Israelite society in general. Whatever the case, eunuchs returning from exile would have found themselves in the midst of institutions that attempted to legislate them out of existence.

For transgender folks in Christian communities today, this description may be all too familiar. We still find ourselves standing on the steps of many churches wondering if we'll be allowed in. We're still denied ordination in the majority of Christian denominations, alongside our lesbian, gay, and bisexual siblings.

The other major connection between the eunuchs of ancient times and transgender people living today is the complexity of our reproductive relationships. Though being transgender doesn't make biological children an impossibility, the process becomes far more complicated. Trans folks who choose to have genital gender-confirmation surgery may have reproductive organs removed, and at that point—unless sperm or eggs have been preserved—we do find ourselves squarely in the eunuch's shoes.

In ancient Israelite society, children were not only a blessing from God; they were also your legacy. Offspring assured that you would be remembered and guaranteed a future for the community. In Genesis 15, God promised a barren Abraham and Sarah both land and children—tangible evidence of a blessing and a covenant. So it's not surprising that those who were unable to have children were in some ways considered exempt from this covenant. To live outside the covenant was to be outside the community.

The ability to produce offspring was such an intrinsic part of Israelite identity that it seemed nonnegotiable. When eunuchs experienced the physical cutting off that changed their identity, they also experienced a cutting off from the future and from their culture. Still, throughout the Bible, many women who were thought to be barren were blessed with a family and subsequently brought in from the margins of their society. Could something similar be done for the eunuch?

I was considering this problem one spring day about four months later as I walked out of the morning service at the seminary chapel. I thought about the students who had been leading the liturgy I'd just taken part in, and how many of our candidates for ordination didn't look the way the writers of the Bible might have expected them to. For one thing, the authors of the codes in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy would have been shocked to see Gentiles reading their sacred texts—and not in the original Hebrew! Jesus' disciples might have been a bit scandalized to see women preaching. Depending on what part of his

ministry you caught him in, the apostle Paul would probably have been surprised to see openly LGBTQ+ folks leading prayers and people who had been divorced distributing the elements of the Eucharist. Yet here we were, all of us, the body of Christ, commemorating Jesus' life and death and resurrection, together.

Several of the texts I'd read on Isaiah 56:1–8 were careful to point out that although verse 5 promises the eunuch a place in God's house, that doesn't necessarily point to any eunuch being allowed to become a priest. Benjamin Sommer reminds us that the passage "does not attribute priestly roles to the eunuchs or the foreigners (since they are not said to approach the altar). It merely stresses that their presence and their offerings are welcome on the holy mountain."³ Since only priests would have had permission to approach the altar, it seems that the prohibition against those that Leviticus 21 deemed "damaged" still applied in Isaiah's restoration community.

But does that mean we should observe the same tradition in our Christian communities today? After all, no seminary worth its salt would declare someone unfit for ministry based on a physical characteristic like an amputated limb, or a visual impairment, or a growth disorder—all of which would have been unacceptable to the Israelite community, based on those same verses in Leviticus.

I began walking across campus, heading in the direction of the thick wooden doors of the library building. It dawned on me that, whether or not eunuchs and foreigners were accepted into the priesthood, Isaiah did speak an incredible word of welcome to two groups who probably never expected to be included in the new Israel. With just eight verses God had given them both an assurance of a part in Israel's future and a place within the community in their own lifetime. I had been reading an article the day before that suggested Isaiah was attempting to address the stigma against Israelites who couldn't have children. C. E. Hammock, the author of the article, explains that Israelites who did not have children were considered disloyal to the community and to God's covenant. He suggests that this may also have been the motive behind the verses that appear to criminalize sexual acts between people of the same gender. The perception of childlessness as disloyalty was almost certainly heightened during Israel's attempt to rebuild and repopulate their homeland after the huge loss of life they experienced during their captivity.

God remedied this situation by presenting the eunuch with a gift that embraced their identity as a eunuch while also providing them with a key back into Israelite society. In direct opposition to the physical and social cutting off

that the eunuch had experienced, God bestowed a name that could never be cut off, a name that Hammock says would “function in the same way as children. For the eunuch, a life without offspring is a life without blessing, [which was] the same issue for Abraham in Genesis 15:2.”⁴

Suddenly, as I thought about the word “blessing,” and the story of Abraham and Sarah, something clicked for me. I stopped walking for a minute and stared up at the clouds moving slowly across a blue sky. What God was giving the eunuchs, through Isaiah’s proclamation, was not just a place in society, and not just hope for a future. By giving the eunuchs the same kinds of gifts given to Abraham and Sarah—a name, legacy, family, acceptance, and blessing—God was consciously associating the two stories in the minds of the people. God was giving the eunuchs a story to connect to—a story that set a precedent, grounded in divine grace.

That was the story I needed to hear. I needed to know that my problems were like the eunuch’s problems, which were like Abraham and Sarah’s problems, and that all of these complications were overcome by God’s great love. As I walked into the library that day, I felt as if the pieces were finally coming together, but I wasn’t sure whether the completed picture would make any difference. As it turned out, the new Israel of Isaiah’s time wasn’t ready to fully welcome eunuchs, despite God’s words. Would the Christian communities I was a part of be any different?

I began hormone therapy in November 2014, a year after I discovered Isaiah 56. By this time I had finished my thesis, graduated from seminary, and come out to my friends and family. Some were taking it better than others.

One night when I was talking with my dad over the phone, he began to ask me about how I understood my gender identity. When we’d had conversations about these issues in the past, it always felt as if we were speaking two different languages. In some ways, I guess we were. My definitions of terms like sex and gender were different from his, partially due to our generation gap. He paused at one point, and I could hear him gathering his thoughts in the silence. Finally, he said, “How do you understand being transgender, theologically?”

Nobody had ever asked me that question so blatantly before. I attempted to distill my thoughts on eunuchs in the ancient world into a couple of sentences, but I could tell by the time we hung up that things hadn’t come out quite right. That night I went to bed turning his question over and over in my mind. There were so many things I wanted to say!

I wanted to tell him that through Isaiah God gave me a sense of belonging that I couldn't shake. I believed that by declaring those outside the gender binary to be acceptable, God declared me acceptable. I wanted to tell him that when I read that eunuchs would be made joyful in God's house of prayer, I found myself convinced that transgender people are meant not only to survive in Christian community, but to thrive in it.

There were several biblical texts that helped me to understand the confluence of my gender identity and my faith, but it was Isaiah 56:1–8 that helped me understand the power of a shared story. Though the eunuchs did not find themselves in exactly the same circumstances as their ancestors Abraham and Sarah, the blessing they received was similar enough to invoke that ancient memory. In the same way, my life did not mirror the Israelite eunuchs' life perfectly, but the obstacles we faced were analogous and required a similar resolution that stitched our experiences together.

It is that combination of affirmation and shared narrative that can give transgender Christians the courage to carve out a space for themselves in a global church that often ignores or actively persecutes them. To know that you belong to a God who gathers the outcasts and who commands doors to open before those sitting outside the gates: this is the kind of love that leads to liberation. God did not ask the eunuchs to pour themselves into the mold of Israel's previous societal norms, nor to bend themselves to fit by taking on specifically gendered roles in the current system. Instead, God called for a transformed community that looked like nothing the people had ever seen.

In the extraordinary months to follow, I was given several opportunities to worship with other queer Christians in communities that exemplified diversity in gender, race, class, and nationality. Each time I would look around me at the sea of faces—all different, all hopeful, all so grateful to be together—and think, “This must be something like the vision Isaiah saw. This is what it looks like to become a house of prayer for all people.”

All the Best Disciples Are Eunuchs

During my last couple of months in seminary I started trying to find a church to join after I graduated. It would have been weird to keep going to chapel with the other students every day, and I really wanted to find a community that would be openly affirming of my identity as a transgender person. I wasn't sure how to start my search, but luckily I had a lot of friends who were pastors! I asked around and found out about this little Lutheran church nearby that met in different places during different parts of the year. They'd worship outside in a public park during the summer, and in an extra room of the Jewish retirement home during the winter, and every month they'd get together in a local bar and sing hymns. As a bonus, I heard that most of the people in this little community were artists, writers, musicians, and generally lovable weirdos—my kind of people exactly.

After a couple of weeks of showing up, sitting in the back, and listening quietly to some darn good preaching, I started getting to know everyone. At the end of each service people would take turns standing up and telling everyone else about important things happening in their lives—good and bad. One person would share something about their job search; a six-year-old would tell us about their recent birthday party; a shy teenager would report about a test they'd gotten an A on that week. These people cared about each other's lives, and it made me feel safe enough to share a bit of mine with them. The week before I started hormone replacement, I went up and told everyone about how excited I was for my voice to drop, and to start recognizing myself in the mirror. Everyone congratulated me, and a couple of people even found me afterward to tell me they were excited to be a part of my journey. It felt amazing.

I kept them up to date during the rest of my transition, and eventually even led an LGBTQ+-ally training session to help everyone get a handle on all those tricky bits of terminology. One day, about two years later, one of these wonderful folks came up to me and said, “Hey, remember that training you did a while ago? Well, I just wanted to say thank you because my child just came out to me this week, and I never would have known what to say if I hadn’t been there for that training, and if I hadn’t seen you go through your transition. It’s helped our family a lot.”

Of course I didn’t show up to this church the first Sunday looking for a way to change anything or help anyone. I was looking for help myself! But as it turns out, when trans people are accepted into church communities, and especially when they’re put into positions of leadership, they can untangle knots and understand things that other people may not be as quick to perceive.

Similarly, in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus singles out eunuchs, the gender-nonconforming people of the ancient world, as an example of people uniquely gifted for discipleship in the kingdom of heaven.

[Jesus] said to them, “Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”

(Matthew 19:11–12)

Lawrence Richardson is a Black trans man and a pastor who has seen this same thing happen firsthand. He grew up part of the Southern Baptist Church, in a family filled with missionaries and ministers, which meant that for the first part of his life his church community was everything. “Church was something that we just did because it was in us to do; so it was never a decision for me to not go to church,” he laughed. When Lawrence came out as queer in high school, though, that changed. “I didn’t know the word ‘transgender,’ but I knew that I was something other than what other people thought that I was. I just wasn’t able to articulate it, so I used the label ‘queer.’ I came out as queer, and that’s when my family told me that I was not allowed to go back to church because it was not consistent or compatible with the theology of our church. So I fell outside of the religious community for the first time in my life.”

Even though this was incredibly difficult for Lawrence, it also pushed him to explore religion and faith on his own, which allowed him to consider things that he might not have if he'd stayed in his home church. He says,

I started to really explore religion and spirituality, and to start to untangle my own identity. I started going to different churches and visiting different religious communities to see how I could connect, because I knew that there was God, and I knew that God was separate from the church—I just also longed to be part of a church community. So it was in college that I got connected with progressive Christians and mainline Christian churches that were affirming of LGBT people.

It was a huge relief for Lawrence to realize that there were Christian churches out there that fully welcomed and included queer folks like him, but there was another important part of his identity that he couldn't leave out. "I grew up in Minnesota, and at the time it was very segregated, so I've always been aware of my racial identity—that was the thing that gave me community first, even before the church. When I came out as queer, I didn't receive a lot of support at first from the Black community, so that was devastating, because not only did I lose my religious community, but I lost the Black community."

But Lawrence didn't give up. He kept reaching out, sure that there must be other people like him.

It can be really difficult to find Black LGBT Christians in some spaces. When I was younger, it felt like you're lucky if you find Black people, and then to say Black gay people, and then to say Black trans people is like, wow, you're asking a lot here. It was really important for me to be able to be in spaces where I could be my whole self and not have to just be, you know, the token Black person, or just be the token trans person, or the only Christian. Because it's difficult to be who you are if there's a part of you that isn't completely accepted in a certain space. As I got older, though, and as I traveled and was able to get out of my little bubble, I started meeting people from all over the place, and I realized that my experience wasn't that rare—that there were Black Christians that also happened to be LGBT everywhere.

Lawrence experienced a call to ministry when he was -twenty-one—right in the middle of this search for a new church home. He connected with a Black

woman who was also a lesbian and a minister of a church, and she helped guide him through his discernment period, which in turn led him to seminary. Lawrence found the community he was longing for first in the Unity Fellowship Church Movement—a church collective where leadership and members are predominantly African American and LGBTQ+. His time in seminary required that he take an internship. An internship with a Unity Fellowship church wasn't available, so again Lawrence cast out his net, fishing for community.

“I was looking for work in a church, and I stumbled upon the United Church of Christ in a very serendipitous way. There was a lot about the UCC that I connected with, in terms of affirming a wide range of people and having our theology be wide enough to accept us, and also wide enough to accept God. I was hired as a youth minister in a UCC church, and it became home very quickly.” The UCC gave Lawrence the new community he'd been looking for, and also gave him the support he needed when he came out as transgender a couple of years later. There's no doubt in his mind now about where he belongs and where he's called to work. There was a pause in our conversation while he did a little mental math, and then he said, happily, “I've been serving at different churches in the UCC now for ten years!”

Lawrence's quest for a new community isn't unusual among transgender Christians; many find themselves kicked out of their home church after coming out. The search for a new faith community can be exhausting, and too often it feels as if you have to sell the church on the idea of keeping you around. It might seem daunting to a congregation to have to learn about pronouns, or to designate a bathroom gender--neutral, or to have difficult conversations about what it means to affirm LGBTQ+ identities. But transgender people are not a burden for Christianity, or for the church. They come bearing gifts!

Jesus' affirmation of eunuchs' value to the kingdom in Matthew 19:11–12 comes immediately after his teaching on divorce, in which he says no two people should be divorced except in cases of unchastity, and the disciples respond, “Well, then it's better not to get married, so you don't take the chance that you might divorce!” Because Jesus' words about eunuchs come directly after this, many biblical scholars have argued that Jesus is referring here not to literal eunuchs, but to some people choosing to be abstinent or celibate.¹ Another group of theologians go even further and suggest that Jesus reclaims the eunuch as a positive metaphor for celibacy because Jesus and his disciples had been called eunuchs in a derogatory sense, since some weren't married.²

But how and when did we decide that Jesus wasn't speaking literally? He may have been speaking about people who were born with diverse sex characteristics, in the case of intersex folks; about people who had been castrated against their will, as many eunuchs were in biblical times; and about people who had chosen a life outside of their assigned sex.

As it turns out, some early Christians did take these verses at face value, either in their own lives or in their teachings, and did choose either to castrate themselves or to live outside the boundaries of their assigned sex, or both. Famous people who took these verses literally include Valentinus, Julius Cassianus, Basilides, Leontios of Antiochia, Melito the Eunuch, Hilarión, Marcarius the Egyptian, and, of course, Origen.³ If those names don't ring any bells for you, though, don't worry. The long and the short of it is that some early Christians did exactly what Jesus hinted at here, and the practice of castration as a form of religious devotion became common enough that when the Council of Nicaea was called in 325 CE, the very first rule they made barred anyone who had willingly been castrated from becoming a clergyperson.⁴

After the council, leaders in the church also decided that the literal reading wasn't very convert-friendly. As Jesus discovered when he confronted the rich young ruler in this same chapter of Matthew, it's pretty hard to win people over to a new system of beliefs by beginning, "Hey, you know all that money and power you have? Give it all up, and you can join us!" In the same way, early bishops realized they weren't likely to convince any of the nobility to become Christians if castration was included anywhere in the recommended practices. In order to make things a little less scary for people with a lot to lose, "they drew from Middle Platonic and Stoic moral sources and contemporary medical theories that advocated abstinence as a means of preserving and assuring masculinity," and "by turning to an allegorical reading of the text, could offer their male converts the comfort of a less threatening but nevertheless rigorous practice of masculinity."⁵ This is when people started tying the Matthew 19:11–12 text to the concept of celibacy, rather than to the lives of eunuchs in Jesus' time.

Theologically and theoretically, the concept of ritual castration for the sake of the kingdom of heaven made a kind of sense for the men of the ancient world. We know that men living in the Roman Empire around the time of Jesus held more power than any other citizens, and indeed that free men were the only citizens, since men could own property and engage in politics, while women, children, and slaves were all considered inferior. The problem with always being

at the top of the food chain, though, is that you run the risk of falling off. As New Testament scholar J. David Hester put it,

Men were constantly threatened with the potential of becoming weak through a variety of activities: whether by bathing too much, or by eating the wrong foods, or by engaging in too much sex, by wearing the wrong clothing, even by taking too much enjoyment in unmanly tasks. ... In this setting eunuchs were the nightmare embodiment of men's worst fears. Eunuchs were a monstrous identity formation, a source of sex-gender confusion.⁶

By making themselves eunuchs, Christian men in the early church were intentionally giving up the power they held as men in their culture. They were taking an action with the direct consequences of placing themselves lower in the social hierarchy. But what are Jesus' final words in Matthew 19? He promises that "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Norwegian theologian Halvor Moxnes sums up this reverse when he asks,

Is the Kingdom of Heaven in Jesus' preaching a confirmation of the existing ontological fields of sex and gender? Is it not rather a reversal, an opening up of fields? Matthew's gospel itself appears to suggest as much, when it combines the eunuch saying with the story of how Jesus reverses the position of children (19:13–15): "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."⁷

Here Jesus says that it's not the adult males who are the keepers of the kingdom. It's the children, the ones with no social power at all. In the upside-down world of the kingdom, giving up riches and power, humbling yourself, and taking a seat at the foot of the table is just good sense.

While all Christians are indeed called to become a part of the topsy-turvy kingdom, Jesus says this teaching about eunuchs is not for everyone. Not every Christian is born intersex, has their body changed without their consent, or feels the call to a life outside the gender and sex norms of their time. But some people do experience this call to a life in which they can open themselves to God and to others, fully; a life in which they give up the social power they would have had as a cisgender person; a life in which they leave home and family to follow Jesus exactly as they are.

When I asked Lawrence what he'd learned about discipleship as a trans person, he looked serious for a moment. Then he said, "When I think about the sexual minorities or gender minorities who Jesus was speaking about here, yes, I believe they have something to teach society about courage, because they have to overcome so much to just live from day to day."

Whether you were a eunuch in New Testament times or a transgender person living today, you're living in a culture that would prefer that you hide yourself and keep your head down, rather than choose to live a radically honest life. For trans Christians like Lawrence who are called to ministry, the call to recognize your own identity can feel eerily similar. "Some of us choose to be authentic and choose to be real, and choose to follow our call, either as it relates to the church or to our gender identity," he explained. "And for some of us ... well, it's like Moses. Even if we didn't want to follow, we have no choice. The call in our souls is just that loud. I'm listening to the call of God in my life, and I'm going to follow that call wherever it leads me, even if that leads me to death, and that's not a message that mainstream society can take."

Justin Tanis, another transgender pastor and theologian, has felt this same connection between the calling to ministry and the calling to exploration of his gender identity. He explains it this way: "I believe that God called me out on this journey of gender to learn particular things and to experience the world in a broader way. I was called to trust God and step out into uncharted territory to learn about myself and about who and what God has called me to be. Calling is about what we are to do and about who we are to be, as well as who we will become."⁸

Transgender Christians also give the church a model for authenticity and a new vision of unconditional love. "When you come out as trans, you are basically saying, 'Whether my family, my job, my friends accept me or not, I'm going to live my life as truly as I possibly can,'" Lawrence said. "And the message of the church usually is: you must change and conform and convert before the church will embrace you, love you, and accept you." But while he agreed that churches should hold to their theological assertions, he suggested that there's a difference between statements of belief as a community, and the practice of requiring individuals to agree with a dogma or creed first, before they can be welcomed, loved, or respected. "I feel like church has become a place where those requirements either preclude love from happening, or limit how love

is shown. What would the church be like if we just accepted people for who and how they were, and loved them there first, before anything else?”

When a church is trans-affirming, transgender Christians can show up as themselves, unapologetically. By doing that, they show everyone else in the congregation that it’s all right to bring their whole selves into the community, that nobody has to “fake it ’til you make it” as a perfect Christian. This kind of authenticity is especially important to younger people, who often see the church as hypocritical and believe that being a churchgoing Christian means that you put on your fake smile alongside your Sunday suit. But once we tell our stories and let ourselves be seen—flaws and all, sins and all, full of beauty and sadness and fear and courage and joy—then we can be Christians who ask for forgiveness, who walk humbly with God, and who love our neighbors as ourselves.

Throughout the Gospels Jesus never once heals a eunuch or uses eunuchs as a negative example. As J. David Hester points out,

There is absolutely no suggestion that to be a eunuch is to be someone who is in any way in need of “fixing,” “healing” or “reintegrating” into society. Jesus heals the blind, the paralyzed, the possessed, the fevered, the leprous, the hemorrhaging, even the dead, in every case restoring them to full societal membership. In the case of the eunuch, however, there is no implication whatsoever of “illness” or social “deformity” in need of restoration. Instead, the eunuch is held up as the model to follow.⁹

Whether you believe Jesus was advocating for castration, for celibacy, or for something else entirely in Matthew 19, the fact that he uses eunuchs as a positive example is huge. It means that Jesus knew about people who fell outside the boundaries of sex and gender, and that he did not see them as broken or as morally corrupt. He saw them as people with a variety of experiences and as people with something important to teach the world about God’s kingdom.

More than that, when Jesus lifts up the eunuch as an example for the disciples and for Christians everywhere, he doesn’t just say that people who are already eunuchs can be part of the kingdom of heaven. He says that the desire for God’s kingdom can sometimes lead to an identity that falls outside the

binary.¹⁰ This complicates some Christians' belief that God wants all of us to be cisgender and male or female, and that the binary itself is required or natural.

The fact is that when God calls us to something, it's always a call to move out of bounds. When ministers are called, they're called out of the secular life they knew and into a new relationship with God and others. When transgender Christians are called, they're called to move outside of the gender binary our society values and into a more challenging and yet stronger and more compassionate relationship with God and others. Alongside our spiritual ancestors the eunuchs, transgender Christians are both transforming others and transformed themselves.

As Lawrence so succinctly put it, "I really feel strongly about the fact that the kingdom of heaven is not some far-off place, but it's something that is begun here and now. I believe the only way it can be achieved is if we go against the grain that says we must be just like everybody else, and instead seek God and ask God for direction to be whatever God is calling us to be. Sometimes God calls us to be something unexpected."

Nothing Can Prevent Me

When I first started making YouTube videos about being transgender and Christian, I figured there would be some pushback. As a general rule, people are more willing to be cruel online, where they can choose to hide behind an anonymous avatar, and I assumed I'd get some rude comments. What I didn't expect was the number of people who would leave long comments accusing me of not being a "real Christian." For many people, this "real Christian" metric seems to be based on whether or not you agree with their particular interpretations of Scripture or church dogma. We Christians like to do this to each other a lot; we love to point at the person on the other side of the street who looks at the Bible through a different lens, or comes to a different conclusion about its meaning, and declare them heretics.

This kind of behavior is written in our history. In 1520 CE Martin Luther, the founder of the Protestant Reformation, was labeled a heretic for questioning the Catholic Church's practices regarding the remission of sins. Before that, the emperor Constantine had to convene a council of around three hundred bishops in the year 325 CE to decide the official church position on the Trinity, because there were just too many gosh-darn heretics running around confusing people! We find people excommunicating each other and disagreeing about the validity of other people's faith in Scripture too, especially in Paul's Letter to the Galatians and in the Acts of the Apostles. From what we understand about these texts, the apostle Paul, Simon Peter, and Jesus' brother James disagreed about which people should be allowed to be baptized and become Christians. Some thought that only Jews who wanted to follow Jesus should be able to convert, while others thought that Gentiles (non-Jews) should be able to be baptized as well. These questions were pressing, because, even as the debates raged in

Jerusalem and through letters back and forth across the Roman world, followers of Jesus were out spreading the gospel without any official guidelines!

In Acts 8 we find the story of one of these traveling apostles, a man named Philip, who was teaching in Samaria before he heard a call from God: “Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship” (Acts 8:26–27).

We’ve talked about eunuchs already, and how they existed outside of the accepted gender roles and expectations of their time, but the eunuch we meet in Acts 8 was outside the norm in other ways as well. For instance, he was from Ethiopia—a place that was considered “the ends of the earth” in that day and was a military threat to the Roman Empire.¹ As an Ethiopian he was probably Black—not necessarily in the way we understand Black identity today, especially in the United States, where our concept of Blackness is seen through the lens of American slavery—but he was certainly different from the people that Philip was used to.

The second thing that marked the Ethiopian eunuch as an outsider was his status as not-quite-Jewish and not-quite--Gentile. It’s made clear in the text that he was not born Jewish, but the story never calls him a Gentile either. Additionally, it’s the baptism of the clearly categorized Gentile Cornelius in Acts 10 that begins the conversation about Gentile inclusion in the early church. The eunuch may have been what the Bible calls “a God-fearer,” which essentially means a person who ascribed to the beliefs of the Jewish people despite not having been born among them. This placed him in between or outside of the established categories when it came to the Jew/Gentile binary of the times. If the eunuch hadn’t already been excluded from temple worship because of his status as a eunuch (since the welcome in Isaiah 56 was never implemented), he would have been kept out of the inner sanctums because he was neither a Jew by birth nor a full convert.

Lastly, despite being put in a place of authority, the eunuch must have been either a slave or a freed former slave, since it would have been unusual for a free person to be castrated. This means that the eunuch of Acts 8, whose name we never learn, was outside the boundaries of gender, race, class, and religion—a quadruple threat.²

The author of Acts 8 obviously doesn't want us to miss out on these middle-ground positions in the story, because he goes out of his way to highlight the fact that it all took place on a wilderness road, calling us to remember that the wilderness has been the no-man's-land for the Israelite people for hundreds of years. Trans biblical scholar Justin Tanis believes that "the fact that the eunuch encounters Philip in the midst of all of these 'between' spaces affirms the workings of God outside of human boundaries and conventions." Furthermore, it may be that this whole meeting "is made possible in part by the unusualness of the space and time in which they encounter one another."³ Had Philip and the eunuch met in another place—such as near the temple in Jerusalem—would the religious gatekeepers of the day have allowed them to have the deep conversation we're about to explore? How do religious gatekeepers affect the lives of outsiders today?

The wilderness is often a familiar space for transgender Christians. It's a space that holds our doubts and our questions, and a place where we can pitch our tents when all other doors have been closed to us. It's a place in between certainties—where we go when we realize we can't stay in the past anymore, but we're also not sure how to walk into the future.

Nicole Garcia spent a lot of her life in the wilderness. "Growing up, I knew I didn't quite fit the role that everyone else wanted me to fit," she told me. "I was the oldest son and the oldest grandson on my mother's side, so I was given kind of a special place in the family, and there were certain expectations." As the oldest son in a Catholic Latino family, Nicole experienced pressure to play sports, to date girls, and to radiate a machismo that just didn't come naturally to her. "I didn't have a girlfriend until college—not until my junior year. I had never really been interested in dating at all because I had feelings towards men, but it was not permissible."

Instead of chasing girls and playing football, Nicole spent her time at church. "I was a very good Catholic boy. I always went to mass two or three times a week. I was very involved in the church. At one point I sat on the congregational council! And so when I was eighteen I discerned a call: I wanted to be a priest! I went to my parents and told them of my desire, and my mom and my grandmother just said no. 'You cannot do that. You have to get married, and you have to have kids.'"

This was a blow that sent Nicole back to the drawing board. She tried to imagine herself doing something else—having some other career outside the

church. She decided to apply to graduate school, but after getting in and studying for a couple of years, she realized she was lost. “I would go clubbing, stay out all night, and I started drinking a lot. And in the middle of all that, as I was trying to discern what I was going to do with my life and deciding to leave graduate school, I also had a crisis of faith. I had prayed so hard to God to try and fix me. I knew I didn’t fit into the roles that I was supposed to fit into.” Nicole felt as if God had abandoned her and ignored her prayer requests to stop being attracted to men, and to stop secretly wearing feminine clothing, which she’d done since she was a kid.

But it wasn’t just God’s silence that damaged Nicole’s faith. She was also coming to understand more about the history of the Catholic Church.

Being Hispanic, I recognized that the Catholic Church had come and colonized the New World. I’m of mixed race—my mother’s family is traced back to the conquistadores, and on my maternal grandmother’s side we are also Pueblo Indians, so we’re a mixture of the Southwest. When I was in college, I took a lot of Chicano studies classes, and it really emphasized the fact that we are a colonized people—that my people are from New Mexico, and that the border moved over us. My ancestors became citizens of the United States because of the Treaty of [Guadalupe] Hidalgo in 1848. So because of what I knew the church did to my people, I could believe in God, but I couldn’t believe in the church.

With her faith damaged and her life feeling directionless, it wasn’t long until Nicole came to a breaking point.

“By 1989 I ended up living in the back of one of my cousin’s trailers and praying to God in detox. I realized my life had gone terribly, terribly wrong. That’s when I first went to AA,” she explained. Alcoholics Anonymous helped Nicole stop drinking, but it also provided her with a community in which she could talk about God and faith without the cultural baggage that accompanied Catholicism or a formal church structure. “In AA you have to recognize that there’s a higher power; that’s part of the program. So when I entered AA, I realized I could believe in God—as long as we kept our distance. He didn’t mess with me, I didn’t mess with him.” Nicole found a way to survive, but she was still wandering in the wilderness.

There are many ways to find a path home when you’re lost. If you’re good with

directions, you can pick up a map or use a compass; if you're not, you can always pull out your smart phone. But what if those items aren't available? In that case you might ask somebody for directions or find a person who can guide you home personally. This is exactly what the Ethiopian eunuch chose to do when he met Philip.

[The eunuch] was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

(Acts 8:28–31)

When I first started exploring this passage, this question—"How can I understand unless someone guides me?"—seemed strange, and even unnecessary. In my spiritual upbringing I'd always been taught that every person can read the Bible and learn something from it all by themselves. So why should the eunuch have to ask for help? It was only later that I recognized the desperation in his words. This person had just traveled all the way from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to worship at the temple, only to find gates and laws barring his way. He'd had to turn around and head home, and it doesn't take much imagination to feel the way he probably felt—frustrated, disappointed, confused, rejected, and alone. He'd already tried reading Scripture for himself, and things hadn't panned out. It's easy to imagine him wondering what he'd done wrong, or what part of Scripture he'd misunderstood. So when Philip showed up on the road and asked if the eunuch knew what this passage is all about, of course he jumped at the chance to get some answers!

After Nicole came out of her downward spiral, she was also in need of some help, but she had no idea how to ask for it. Because transgender people didn't exist much in popular media in the 1990s (and when they did, they were depicted as mentally ill, or as tragic figures facing inevitable death from violence or AIDS), Nicole couldn't imagine what life as a transgender woman would look like. In fact, the word "transgender" hadn't even made it into her lexicon, and at the time the closest word she had for her identity was "crossdresser."*

While she didn't want the life her family expected her to have, there just didn't seem to be any alternative. She ended up meeting a woman she cared

about, and they got married the next year. She also took up a job in law enforcement and corrections, which helped give her some “macho cred.” While she was working as a correctional officer in a men’s prison, she found people who she thought could teach her a thing or two:

There was a former marine gunnery sergeant who took me under his wing and taught me how to be an officer—how to walk, how to talk, how to get the cooperation of individuals who didn’t want to cooperate with me. I learned how to beat people up. I learned how to be a man. I was relatively good at it! I got a lot of respect, and I was promoted within a couple of years. The problem was that putting on the uniform was putting on a facade. I was so angry all the time. When I took off that uniform it was just so hard to relax and be who I was, so I started drinking again.

Nicole was able to keep up this act for five years as a correctional officer before it became too much, and she decided to become a parole officer instead, which allowed her to set down some of the anger she’d had to arm herself with. The foundation of her marriage also began to crumble during this time, and after eight years Nicole and her wife decided to divorce. After spending so long trying to be who everyone else wanted her to be, life was starting to come apart at the seams again.

One night, two weeks after she moved out of the house she’d shared with her wife, Nicole was sitting in her new living room with a pint of whisky and a loaded gun. She had tried to do everything that was expected of her, and nothing had worked. She felt as if she was out of options. “I couldn’t figure out why I walked away from everything that I was supposed to have,” she sighed. “But I decided I couldn’t take my own life, and that’s when I came back to Jesus.”

“How did it happen?” I asked. “What did ‘coming back to Jesus’ look like for you?”

Nicole laughed. “Well, it wasn’t one of those ‘oh please, Jesus! Jesus, help me!’ moments. It was more like ‘OK, you big SOB, if I’m going to come back to you, you gotta ante up this time. Something’s got to change.’”

I laughed with her for a minute. I’d never heard of somebody coming back to God with a demand! But of course there’s quite a bit of precedent in Scripture for a request like Nicole’s. Psalm 44 is a great example. The psalmist presents their case to God, pointing out that the people had done everything God had

asked, but terrible things had still happened. The psalmist cries out to God, saying, “Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?” (Ps. 44:23–24 NIV). Nicole was, in effect, saying the same thing—that she had done everything she had been asked to do, and now it was God’s turn. She was asking God to awake and breathe some life into the situation.

Somehow, that breath showed up. “A couple of days later I’m sitting at my computer and a message comes in from the Colorado State Employee Assistance Program, saying that if you’re depressed or suicidal or abusing substances, give us a call and you get six free sessions with a psychologist. And I thought, ‘Wow, God, you work quick!’”

Nicole was in therapy later that very same week, and her psychologist was able to help her deal with the depression she had been experiencing. Over time she also opened up about her sexuality, and the fact that she often dressed in feminine clothes at home. The therapist referred her to the Gender Identity Center of Colorado and to a support group for crossdressers. That group in turn referred her to a conference on gender diversity, and there she finally found the guidance she’d been looking for all along. “I walked into this conference and I found a couple of hundred people who were just like me! I was amazed. It was incredible,” Nicole gushed.

Almost by accident, Nicole decided to go to a workshop on transgender people and medical transition. She was up early on the second morning of the conference, and she couldn’t find any of her new acquaintances. “I thought, ‘OK, this workshop doesn’t have anything to do with me, but I don’t want to sit in the lobby by myself.’ So I went to the workshop and I heard my story. Everything they said was so familiar! And as I’m sitting there in that workshop, I finally realized that I was Nicole. I was a woman. It just became crystal clear, and a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders.”

The educators and other trans folks at the conference gave Nicole language and clarification for something she’d always felt to be true, but beyond that they gave her a community. Nicole made a friend there whom she would keep in touch with for years to come.

One of the trans women I met at that first conference was also a police officer, and so there were a couple of things we had in common. We would talk almost daily for a while. I told her about my faith being reawakened and how God had dragged me to this conference, and that I

wanted to find a church, but I knew I couldn't go back to the Catholic Church. She told me about this wonderful open and welcoming Lutheran church. I initially said no, because being a good former Roman Catholic, I couldn't go to the church of a heretical, excommunicated priest! But after the third time she invited me, I thought, "Maybe God is trying to tell me something." So I ended up walking into St. Paul's Lutheran Church in downtown Denver, and the people were incredible. They were warm, they were welcoming, and they asked me if I liked the service. The thing about St. Paul's is they celebrate high church, so it was very Catholic, and I knew all the words. The only thing they didn't do was kneel, and I could live without kneeling!

So Nicole was able to find the people who could guide her home and help her understand what God was doing in her life. In October 2003, after going through a new members' class that dove deep into Luther's catechism and kickstarted her love of Lutheran theology, she officially became a member of St. Paul's Church. When I asked her how she knew that she was really and truly accepted as a member of the church, she joked, "You know you're a part of a church when you're asked to be part of a committee. I was asked to be part of the Reconciling in Christ committee soon after I joined!"

Seeing ourselves in Scripture can be a tricky business. While we want the text to speak to us and our lives, we shouldn't put our own biases and modern ideas into the writers' mouths, or assume that the biblical authors lived and thought just as we do. People have been toeing this line as long as sacred texts have existed, and it's heartening to see the eunuch in Acts 8 struggling with the very same problem. Fortunately God placed Philip right in the eunuch's path so that they could try to work it out together.

Now the passage of the scripture that [the eunuch] was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

(Acts 8:32–35)

The passage that Philip and the eunuch read together is from Isaiah 53:7–8, from what has commonly been called a Suffering Servant song. In Christian circles this text has historically been understood as a prophecy about Jesus, and how Jesus would be crucified and suffer for the sake of humanity, even though he himself was sinless. When the eunuch read the passage, though, he didn’t read it through that lens, because he had never heard of Jesus, and so he asked Philip whom the passage was referring to.

The question was important to the eunuch, possibly because he identified so strongly with the character Isaiah was describing. The eunuch too had experienced humiliation, specifically in the form of castration, and possibly also in the form of slavery. He had been denied justice as someone whom God invited to worship in the temple, but who was nevertheless barred by human gatekeepers. He must have been asking himself if somehow this passage was about people like him. If it was, that meant that he held a place in the community he so desperately wanted to be accepted into! As the Rev. Broderick Greer points out in his sermon on this text, the eunuch was not asking these questions because he had a vague interest. The eunuch was poring over Scripture and teasing out answers because he had to in order to survive as a gender-nonconforming, racially marginalized, royally subjugated person outside the bounds of the faith he sought to join.⁴

Theology as a form of survival is exactly why transgender people, and particularly trans people of color, find themselves drawn into the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. Nicole saw herself in the eunuch in the same way the eunuch saw himself in the Suffering Servant. Trans people experience humiliation when we’re outed without our permission, when we’re kicked out of our homes, when we’re accused of being dangerous to children and cisgender women, and when we’re dismissed as mentally ill. We are denied justice when we’re fired from our jobs because of our gender identity, when laws are made to keep us out of public bathroom facilities, when trans women are profiled as sex workers, and when religious gatekeepers deny trans Christians the ability to join with other people of faith in praising God. Worst of all, we find ourselves like those sheep led to

slaughter, as the lives of Black transgender women and other trans people of color are violently taken from this earth.

When I asked Nicole about connecting with the story of the Suffering Servant, she made a point I hadn't thought of before. "I consider Acts 8:26–40 crucial to my identity as a transgender woman of color," she explained,

but I can't say I've suffered as much as many of my sisters. I'm extremely well educated. I have a roof over my head and food in front of me. But the way our society has developed, there are people who are marginalized. People who aren't given the opportunities that I had. I think they may feel like they're suffering, but really, they're being oppressed. There's a difference between suffering willingly, like Jesus did, and suffering at the hands of other people without any choice in the matter. Christ accepted our sins. He took them on himself and he suffered because he chose to suffer, whereas so many people now who are dying and being murdered aren't choosing that. It is thrust upon them.

When we see ourselves in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch—and by extension, the story of the Suffering Servant—we have to remember that we are not told to suffer for suffering's sake, or to let ourselves be crushed by injustice because suffering somehow gets us closer to God. Instead, God decides to move in our direction by choosing to experience suffering alongside us. All the while we're experiencing oppression, God is there, and it's Jesus who's seeing himself in our story.

Finally, after the eunuch hears the gospel and dives deep into Scripture with Philip, the hopeful outsider asks the most important question yet: "As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?' He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:36–39).

This is Nicole's favorite part of the story. "This is the whole point!" she said enthusiastically. "Inclusion is not up to us. It's up to Christ. When the eunuch saw the water and heard the Word about Jesus Christ, and he said, 'What's to keep me from being baptized?' Philip didn't say, 'Wait a second, let's look at the

law.’ Philip said, ‘Stop the chariot, you have heard the Good News, you have been called to be a disciple of Christ. You shall be baptized.’”

Justin Tanis agrees in his reading of the text, pointing out that the eunuch “brings the particularity of his gender to his encounter with Philip and ultimately to his relationship with God. ... He is not baptized in spite of being a eunuch or after lengthy session of apologetics explaining his gender to Philip, but simply at the point at which they passed a body of water.”⁵ So how did Philip decide that nothing—not race or nationality or gender or status or his physical anatomy or previous beliefs—could prevent the eunuch from becoming part of the body of Christ? Well, probably because God gave him some pretty clear signs. First, in verse 26 he was told by an angel to go out to this road, and then in verse 29 the Holy Spirit told him to get into the chariot with the eunuch. This must have meant that God wanted Philip to meet with the eunuch for a particular purpose, and Philip must have come to the conclusion that his commission in this situation was the same one Jesus had given all the disciples in Matthew 28:19: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” This was confirmed when, right after the eunuch’s baptism, Philip was snatched away by the Spirit, as if to say, “All right, that’s what we needed! All finished here!”

For the eunuch this encounter ends in incredible, nearly unbelievable joy. But despite the inner transformation that baptism brings, some things stay the same. For instance, the eunuch is still a eunuch; baptism did not change his physical body or anything about his gender. None of the things that made him an outsider in the first place have been changed or “fixed.” The author of Acts 8 may be giving us a little hint to that effect when he writes that the eunuch “went on his way,” continuing on the same path he’d been on when Philip first found him.

We don’t know what happened to the Ethiopian eunuch after his encounter with the Holy Spirit and with Philip, but we do know something about the way this story has affected others. For Nicole, the encouragement found in the eunuch’s story gave her the strength to claim the calling she had had since she was a child:

In 2007 I got up in front of the Rocky Mountain Synod Assembly for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and made a bold statement about being a transgender Latina of faith, and I cited Acts 8 as part of why I belong in the church. I was noticed by the regional coordinator of Lutherans -Concerned—the LGBT affirming organization for the ELCA

—and we had a wonderful talk for about an hour. Two weeks later I got a phone call from the coordinator, and they asked me to share my story with other churches.

Nicole continued to work with Lutherans Concerned, now called ReconcilingWorks, and to visit and speak with churches who wanted to know more about how to support LGBTQ+ people in their community. “In 2008 I was elected to the board of directors as the transgender representative. I was flown around the country over the next couple of years to give speeches and give talks and do a lot of workshops. Sharing my story—and getting to hear the stories of others—really helped to solidify who I was as a child of God.”

But Nicole didn’t stop there. After spending so much time talking about theology and the Bible with other people, she decided that she wanted some more formal training, but she wasn’t sure how to go about getting it. Then, during a regular midweek service at her home church, the Holy Spirit struck again. “One Thursday morning I went to services at St. Paul’s. During communion I watched Pastor Kevin raising the host above his head and saying the words of institution, and I was just like, ‘That’s where I need to be! I have to be a pastor! I have to be ordained!’ So I told Kevin right afterward that I needed to be a pastor, and he said, ‘Yes! Yes, you do!’”

These days Nicole Garcia is serving as a pastoral intern in Colorado and is on track to earn a master of divinity degree in May 2018, which will enable her to be considered for ordination and be the clergywoman she’s always been called to be. When we talked about how she thinks Acts 8:26–40 will affect her ministry, she pointed out that this story contains a biblical imperative for Christians:

An angel sends Philip down the road and the Spirit commanded him to get into the chariot. God isn’t just suggesting these things; God is saying, “Go do it.” That’s what we must do. We must spread the Word and minister to people without our human biases getting in the way. We must meet people where they are. We have to recognize that the Gospel is not just for one type of person—this tremendous gift of grace has been given to all the world.

In a way, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is a story about two conversions. The eunuch may be the one who gets baptized, but Philip is the person who has to change his metric for who’s in and who’s out. Even though

this story is two thousand years old, a third conversion is still taking place: will the church eventually realize that when God's love overpowers all human distinctions, nothing can prevent us from full inclusion?

* The difference between these two terms has to do with gender identity versus gender expression. A transgender person has a gender identity that conflicts with their sex assigned at birth, and this conflict is persistent. Someone who identifies as a crossdresser, on the other hand, still identifies as their sex assigned at birth. They just enjoy playing with clothing, accessories, and hair styles that are associated with another gender.

Even Jesus Had a Body

During my early college years I remember at one point coming across a quote that was credited to C. S. Lewis, though I now know it was misattributed.¹ “You don’t have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body.” I loved this idea when I first heard it, and because I wasn’t yet familiar with any theology concerning my body, I grabbed onto it like a life raft. Of course! This must be why I feel so uncomfortable in this meatsack I’m forced to wear! My body is just a crummy old shell for the real me: the soul. As someone experiencing gender dysphoria, I found that this explanation gave me a reason for the discomfort I was experiencing.

But, as it turns out, there are quite a few problems with this idea. First and foremost, there’s no biblical backing for it. As we saw in Genesis 1, the Hebrew people didn’t think about humans as divided beings. We are made in the image of God, and that image is woven throughout our entire existence. There are the hundreds of verses that tell us that our bodies are important to God—from the Levitical codes that talk about what we should and shouldn’t do with our bodies, to the concern Jesus has for the bodies of people he meets, feeds, and heals throughout his ministry.

In the letters of the New Testament we do see some conflict between our bodies and other parts of us, especially in Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, where Paul sets up a flesh vs. spirit dichotomy, but this way of thinking came from Greek philosophy, not from Scripture.² Take Romans 8:5, for instance: “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.” Paul is clearly getting at something true here by saying that what we want to do is not always what we should do, and that we should set our minds on

what God wants. But by using “flesh” as a catchall for bad things and “spirit” as a category for good, he sets us up to think that our physical bodies are intrinsically sinful and bad—which just doesn’t hold up when we look at the rest of the Bible.

Many trans Christians find themselves asking questions about the connections between their body and their faith; so let’s take a look at some of these other body passages in Scripture through the lens of one person’s story.

Asher O’Callaghan grew up in Littleton, Colorado, as part of the Church of Christ—not to be confused with the United Church of Christ, a progressive and LGBTQ+-affirming denomination. Asher described his home church as conservative and fundamentalist: “I grew up with a good dose of fire and brimstone and hell. And I was just a sensitive kid, so the hellfire thing didn’t go over well for me. I always had a feeling that I was going to hell, and that resulted in a lot of sleep issues, and just a lot of fear and guilt and shame. So religion sort of became this guilt-ridden, duty-driven thing for me.”

Even though Asher didn’t come out as bisexual until high school, and then as transgender after college, he still felt the internal sense of difference that so many LGBTQ+ people experience during their youth. That scared him, because he knew his church’s position on homosexuality, and his fear grew even deeper. “I didn’t love God. I was just terrified and wanted to appease God. I actually remember thinking that in middle school, coming to realize, the first commandment Jesus gives is to love God, ... so I’m screwed! Because I can do all of this stuff for God, or at least I can try, but loving God? I’m too scared. I don’t know how to do that.”

When he reached middle school, Asher decided to get baptized. “Churches of Christ have believer baptism, and most folks get baptized around middle school, because that’s kind of the time when you go off of your parents’ fire insurance policy,” he laughed. “That’s when you’re considered to be culpable and accountable for your choices.” But it wasn’t just Asher’s age that had him thinking about baptism as a safeguard against hell. It was also a sermon he heard the Sunday after the shooting at Columbine High School just a few miles away. “Right after the shooting our preacher gave a sermon that was like, ‘even in places where you think that you’re safe, you’re not.’ The whole theme was, ‘You never know when you’re gonna die, so figure it out.’”

The next week Asher volunteered to be baptized. For a while it seemed to help, but before long the fear was back. When he got to high school, he joined

Young Life, an evangelical youth ministry group. To Asher, coming from a Church of Christ background, the Young Life theology seemed too good to be true:

It was the first time that I was introduced to this God that loved me. Like, actually loved me. Love that meant more than just, “I love you and I’ve done all I can do, but you didn’t hold up your end of the bargain, so you’re going to burn in hell forever.” It was a love that could actually be transformative for me. But it was also kind of terrible to think about, because I was taught that most Christians just believed what they wanted to believe, rather than actually taking the Bible seriously, as we did in the Church of Christ. So I was kind of stuck, because I wanted to believe in this wonderful God that my Young Life leaders had taught me about, but I just couldn’t. It felt like a fairy tale.

By college Asher had sunk into a deep depression. His anxiety about hell was still around, he was having doubts about his faith, and when he came out as bisexual, his college youth group refused to support him. He found a therapist and began taking medication that helped his anxiety and depression, but the therapist wasn’t LGBTQ+-affirming and suggested techniques common to conversion therapy.

“She suggested at one point that my sexuality was the result of having ‘a wounded gender identity,’ and that if only I understood that God sees me as a beautiful daughter, then I would be able to fully live into my permanently straight sexuality. But that didn’t work! She then suggested at one point that I put a rubber band around my wrist and snap myself when I had ‘gay thoughts.’”

Unsurprisingly, this didn’t work either. Instead, it was a painful reminder of Asher’s battle with self-harm. “If cutting myself badly enough that I needed to go to the emergency room and get staples wasn’t sufficient to change me, I don’t know how a rubber band would do it,” he sighed.

For Asher, having a body was a liability. Being made of flesh and blood meant that you were predisposed to sin, and that you were a finite being who was going to die. Even worse than that, having a soul alongside your unruly body meant that death wasn’t the end—that something worse was coming. The fear that this instilled led to an urge to punish or purify the body as much as possible, in order to escape greater punishment later.

After college Asher decided to pursue another degree. “I thought I wanted to get a PhD in religion. I wanted to study the religious people and poke them around a bit, like an amoeba in a petri dish,” he laughed. “It felt empowering!” Rather than being on the receiving end of doctrine and discipline, academia allowed Asher to observe from a safer distance. But that distance didn’t last, because when he took a class on queer theology, it became obvious that faith was going to become a personal matter again.

He met a couple of new friends in this class, and one Sunday they invited him to come to church with them. Asher agreed, and the group ended up at a local Lutheran church.

It was the first time I’d ever experienced liturgy, and it was weird and wonderful. What really got me was the communion table. They said, “Everyone without exception is welcome to the table.” And I went, not thinking much of it, but then, every single week I found myself thinking, “I need to go back.” Not because I felt a sense of duty or obligation, but because I felt it sustaining me. I felt hungry for going through the line and getting the Eucharist again. I felt like it was holding my life together.

Suddenly the body that had caused so many problems—the body that threatened rebellion and sin and death—was the thing leading him toward a physical manifestation of grace. Asher felt a spiritual hunger that fueled his curiosity, but also a physical hunger that propelled his legs back into that church week after week.

“I started going there regularly, and the preaching was fabulous, and the Lutheran theology fit me. I didn’t even know that congregations like that existed! I felt like I could finally be myself in a religious community. I felt like I was at home with my faith identity. And I think that gave me the guts to start facing up to the gender stuff.”

Not long after Asher joined this welcoming church, he came out as transgender and decided to begin transitioning. He talked with his pastor about memorializing his transition in some way, and they worked together to create a liturgy to remember his birth name and bless his new one:

On Baptism of Our Lord Sunday our whole community had a renaming rite for me. It was the first time that I remembered my baptism in a positive way, because my baptism had been such an awful, fearful thing.

And I was anointed, and everyone greeted me by my new name for the first time. It was amazing—finding a home where I could be my full self, where my gender identity and my sexuality and my faith all went together, and weren't seen as mutually exclusive. It meant that I didn't have to disembodied myself to be a part of the community. I didn't have to dismember myself. That experience set me free. It just unleashed something inside of me that was like, "Well I have to do more of this!" I couldn't help myself! I had to figure out a way to go and do this thing for others, so that other people can have this experience. Because this is such good news! This could change the world!

Asher's experience of being put back together—of being "re-membered"—is something intrinsic to the theology of the church. First Corinthians 12 is all about the way in which different members of the church bring their particularities, their gifts, and their perspectives together to create a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Paul uses a body metaphor to describe this action and says in verse 12, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." Essentially, Paul is saying that by joining with Christ in our baptism, we are also joined to every other person who has ever been baptized. He goes on to say:

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable. ... If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

(1 Corinthians 12:14–22, 26)

This text is absolutely essential to understanding why the church is called to

affirm transgender Christians. Here we are told that no member of the body is dispensable, no member can deem any other person unnecessary, and just because someone does decide to say someone else is dispensable or unnecessary does not make it true. Through his baptism Asher is just as much a part of the body of Christ as any other Christian in the world, and his gifts and needs and suffering and joy affect all other members.

Biblical scholar Christina M. Fetherolf believes that Paul intentionally chose to use this metaphor in his letter to the Corinthian Christians because they had such a negative view of physical bodies. She writes, “At least some of the assembly believe that the physical body is irrelevant, a notion which Paul negates when he weds the physical and material to the divine and spiritual through his use of these bodily metaphors. It is the collective, physical community, not any building, which houses the Spirit of God.”³

Of course, the most undeniable confirmation of the importance of bodies comes in the form of a baby born in a manger in Bethlehem. As Asher puts it, “God coming as a child and then growing up and going through puberty, and having a human life with a human body—I think that declares once and for all unequivocally, undoubtedly, that flesh is hallowed. That our bodies are holy.”

Theologian James B. Nelson echoed this in a joyful way when he said about the opening to the Gospel of John:

We claim an incarnational tradition. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” And when the Word came to dwell with us, it became—what? A book? A creed? A theological system? A code of morality? No! To the everlasting embarrassment of all dualistic piety, it became flesh. Note well how counter--cultural this conviction is. The opening words of the Fourth Gospel were undoubtedly shocking to its first readers, steeped as they were in the belief that the world was impure and that “flesh” was the root cause of that impurity. Now they are told that God was living and loving in this fleshly and fully human life of a carpenter, turned itinerant rabbi. It was a jarring claim.⁴

So if Jesus himself had a body, and it was through life and death in that body that the whole world was redeemed, why do we subscribe to the idea that bodies are awful things we must overcome, or that they’re a secondary and disposable thing separate from our true identity?

Even after Jesus' resurrection from the dead, he goes on doing very bodily things. In Luke's account we see Jesus meeting his disciples after resurrection and attempting to reassure them by asking for breakfast:

He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

(Luke 24:38–43)

The disciples have a very similar reaction in John's account of another postresurrection meeting, and it's here that we meet the famous doubting Thomas. All the disciples are gathered together in a room with the doors locked because they are afraid of meeting Jesus' same fate at the hands of the Roman government, when Jesus appears to them suddenly. The only disciple not present at the time is Thomas; when the other disciples tell Thomas what happened, he replies, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." The very next week the disciples gather again, hoping for another sighting, and this time Thomas is with them.

Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

(John 20:26–29)

Jesus' physicality after his resurrection can be powerful for transgender Christians, especially those who often field questions about their own bodies either in heaven or after Jesus' second coming. As a Lutheran, Asher confesses a belief in the resurrection of the body at the end of time; so I asked him what he thought his body might look like. He responded,

I have no idea, to be honest. But I do know that it will be a body—I do think that the resurrection is going to be material. It's not just going to be spirits floating around in the sky. I don't know what my body will look like, but I think it's going to have to be pretty similar to my body now. I take great comfort in the fact that when Jesus is resurrected, it's clear that he still has wounds. I mean, I would hope that they weren't painful anymore, but they're still there. It gives me great comfort, that he still had scars, because as someone who's dealt with a lot of self-harm I still have a lot of scars, and they're part of who I am now. I wouldn't want them to go away, because they're part of my story.

That recognition resonated with me too, as a transgender man who has had top surgery—a reconstruction of my chest that left me with two horizontal scars below my pectoral muscles. I wouldn't want to lose those scars either. They're a sign of the journey I've undertaken, and they're one of the many things I love about my body for that very reason. If Jesus' body retains the features that make him recognizable to the disciples in the upper room and during their beach breakfast, then I hope I too will keep my defining physical characteristics in some fashion.

Body theology and the belief in God's incarnation in Jesus are important for all Christians, but even more so for those whose bodies have been marginalized, ignored, or oppressed. Nancy Eiesland, the author of the groundbreaking book *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, wrote that she had a similar connection with the recognition of Jesus' postresurrection wounds. After feeling defeated by the lack of accessibility for disabled people in Christian spaces, she read the story of Jesus' appearance to the disciples and concluded, "Here was the resurrected Christ making good on the promise that God would be with us, embodied, as we are—disabled and divine. In this passage, I recognized a part of my hidden history as a Christian. The foundation of Christian theology is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet seldom is the resurrected Christ recognized as a deity whose hands, feet, and side bear the marks of profound physical impairment."⁵

Eiesland goes on to say that Christians must not only develop theology that includes disabled bodies, but that they must let that theology be created by disabled people themselves. "Such a theology must not be construed as a 'special-interest' perspective, but rather an integral part of reflection on Christian

life. We must come to see disability neither as a symptom of sin nor an opportunity for virtuous suffering or charitable action. The Christian community as a whole must open itself to the gifts of persons with disabilities, who, like other minority groups, call the church to repentance and transformation.”⁶

Black theologians also have an incredible amount to teach the church about embodied theology—especially in the United States, where Black bodies have been considered inferior and disposable. In a country built on the backs of Black slaves, and in our modern world where Black people are gunned down by police and mysteriously found dead in prison cells, calling Black bodies holy is another necessary and revolutionary act. While some Black theologians do find a touchstone in Jesus’ body after resurrection, many see themselves most clearly in the crucifixion itself. As famed theologian James Cone asserts,

When we encounter the crucified Christ today, he is a humiliated Black Christ, a lynched Black body. Christ is Black not because Black theology said it. Christ is made Black through God’s loving solidarity with lynched Black bodies and divine judgment against the demonic forces of white supremacy. Like a Black naked body swinging on a lynching tree, the cross of Christ was “an utterly offensive affair,” “obscene in the original sense of the word,” “subjecting the victim to the utmost indignity.”⁷

In fact, while much of white, European theology tended toward centering the importance of the soul above the importance of the body, it was Black Christians who held on to the physicality of Jesus in their theology and in their spirituals and reminded the world that Jesus walked, talked, ate, cried, and slept. Black womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas has said that enslaved Black Christians actually helped clarify theology and make it more accessible to everyday people, because they had to use language from their own experiences to explain God’s work in their lives, since they were blocked from studying theology formally. Yet, despite the fact that for a large portion of American history Black people were barred from seminaries and institutions of higher learning, they managed to communicate a truth that the ancient Christian councils had a hard time describing. Said Douglas, “Their testimony of Jesus as one who understood their tears and pain, as one who walked with them, talked with them, and understood their grief affirmed that Jesus was a real historical presence who brought God to earth. The enslaved testimony clarified what the

Nicaea/Chalcedon councils attempted to declare: that in Jesus, God was actually [in the flesh], incarnate, an embodied reality in human history.”⁸

Theology done from the perspective of marginalized groups creates a richer, more comprehensible, more compassionate Christianity. To ignore the contributions from people with bodies different from our own is equivalent to saying some bodies are not as holy as others—that some members don’t belong in the body of Christ—despite scriptural witness to the contrary.

Once transgender Christians have gotten to the point where they understand their bodies to be both whole and holy, the next question is often, “Is it all right to change my body?” Answers to this question usually dovetail into conversations about whether or not God made a mistake during someone’s creation and conception. Some Christians will cite Psalm 139 as proof that God foreordained certain things about a person, and so those particular characteristics shouldn’t be changed. But is that an accurate reading of this passage?

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
 My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
 all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
 How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
 I come to the end—I am still with you.

(Psalm 139:13–18)

When I asked Asher about his thoughts on this psalm, he was quick to point out that these verses don’t refer only to God’s creation of our bodies, that the reference to our “inward parts” or “inmost parts” encompasses us as whole

beings. “I think God knit together my body and my identity,” Asher explained. “I think God gave me this body and this identity, and that’s exactly what God intended from the start.”

Even though we’re made in a certain way before we’re born, we don’t stay exactly as we were originally made. “I think that God knit us together in our mother’s wombs, but I also think that God is active in our lives, knitting us together in every moment,” Asher said. “God’s been knitting me together every day since. I don’t think that as soon as we were born God was like, OK, all done! I think that creation continues.”

Asher and I notice the wonder the psalmist feels toward the end of the passage when he tries to comprehend God’s infinite thoughts, the incredible variety and wide expanse of God’s creative abilities. It’s too much for the psalmist to take in, and surely too much for human beings to understand. So why is it that we seem determined to put limits on what God can and can’t do, and when that work is finished?

Indeed, the continuing nature of creation is something that’s observable even in the first chapters of Genesis. Asher pointed to Genesis 1:28, where God gives Adam and Eve dominion over creation, and Genesis 2:19, where God brings every animal to Adam to receive a name, making Adam a partner in the creative effort:

I think that God intends for us to make choices and to actively have an impact on creation, for better or for worse. That’s part of our having free will. For example, God gives Adam the right to name things. All of creation wasn’t already shaped; God gave out jobs to continue the process. And part of our job as humans is to interact with God, and not to create our own identities, but to become more fully who we are. Based on what we see in Genesis, I think that God is fine with us making choices in that process.

Scholar and theologian Terence Fretheim also believes humans have a role in creation as evaluators and problem solvers. He believes that “if God not only evaluates the world as good but reevaluates an aspect of the world as ‘not good’ (2:18), and if the only creatures capable of evaluating are human beings made in the image of God, then God here sets a key human task within ongoing creation.”⁹

He also lifts up the blessing that God gives to the first human beings as the moment in which God actively shares creative power. “To bless others is an act of giving power and potentiality to them; it is another dimension of the divine power-sharing activity. ... Blessing is understood to be integral to the creative process itself; it enables creatures to participate in the ongoingness of creation. ... Creation has to do, not just with beginnings of things, but with a continuing process of becoming.”¹⁰

Human beings exist somewhere in the middle of that becoming process—somewhere between the moment God begins to knit us together in the womb and the moment we experience resurrection alongside Jesus in God’s new heaven and new earth. In the meantime, we do our best to honor our bodies and to use our creative abilities to bring forth life—and maybe even more than life. While we talked about choice and free will, Asher smiled. He said, “You know, I think God delights in the fact that humans are interactive. We’re not mindless—we create things and we fix things and we argue and we find new ways to solve problems. I think God likes to see us being creative. I think we bring God joy.”

Life beyond Apologetics

The year before I came out as transgender, I visited a lot of churches. One week I'd go to an Episcopal church that I'd heard had a wonderful organist. The next Sunday I'd go to an evening service at a new church plant filled with twenty-somethings and acoustic guitars. Then the next week I'd head over to a Methodist church because I wanted to hear a particular pastor's sermon. I hardly ever visited the same church twice. That wasn't because I didn't like them; it was because I was afraid. I was feeling more self-conscious about my body than ever before, and while everyone was friendly enough, I could also tell that people were having a hard time pinpointing my gender, which for me felt awkward. I was so nervous about my voice—which was about two octaves higher than it is now and never failed to make people go, “Oh, I'm sorry, I mean ma'am”—that I never spoke to anyone when I could avoid it.

My solution to this problem was to try my hardest to be invisible. I would come in after the service had already started, take a seat in the back, and make a dash for the door as soon as the last hymn was through. Leaving on my own terms was preferable to having people kick me out, which I was afraid they'd do if they found out I was trans.

Of course, this also meant that I wasn't giving anyone the chance to tell me that I was welcome! I was hungry for a community in which I could pray and read Scripture and sing and share my life, but I was so scared that I allowed myself only to nibble on the crumbs from the communion table. Sometimes, when you're starving, any bite of food at all seems like the best you can hope for, and it's hard to dream of a full meal, let alone the kind of kingdom feast Jesus talks about in the Gospels. You start to trick yourself into thinking the scraps are enough.

When I started studying the theology of LGBTQ+ people, one of the things that became obvious is that we've had to spend a lot of time doing something called apologetics—the scriptural or theological defense of an idea. Almost every book on the faith of queer folks deals with apologetics (this book included!) and has a chapter that explains why the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is not actually about same-gender relationships or why God's creation of Adam and Eve doesn't mandate the existence of only two sexes.

Because Christians have spent so long vilifying LGBTQ+ people and using Scripture to make their point, queer Christians have had to engage with these very same passages in order to defend themselves. This is all well and good as far as it goes, because even when two people disagree about what a particular piece of text means, at least they're meeting on common ground. The problem comes when LGBTQ+ Christians begin to feel as if their faith is made up of only apologetics and defense mechanisms. In a way, it's the same problem that transgender people have when they find themselves focusing entirely on their gender dysphoria and scrambling away from all the things that cause them pain and anxiety, rather than intentionally moving forward toward what some like to call "gender euphoria"—the contentment, authenticity, and joy that you feel when you get to be yourself.

But if we spend all our time focusing on what's wrong, how do we do what's right? If we spend all our time trying to use Scripture to defend ourselves, when do we get to see the Bible as a life-giving fount of grace for all people? When do we get to hear God speaking into our lives, if we're focused on proof-texting our arguments? In short, it's a good and healthy thing to recognize that the theological crumbs that we once cherished are no longer enough. We need a full, whole-grain loaf of the bread of life.

Taj Smith also experienced some hesitation about visiting a new church when he stepped through the doors of the United Church of Christ community down the road from his college campus. He hadn't grown up religious, but his mom had always encouraged him to explore different faith traditions. Taj had a real interest in religion and could often be found reading about Buddhism, Islam, and other world faiths. He'd also tag along to church with friends, and they introduced him to evangelical Christianity. As a teenager he joined the youth group at a huge church in town, partly because it was a place to hang out with classmates and partly because he was genuinely interested in the subject matter.

When Taj told people that he was queer, though, things went south. “I stopped going there after a number of folks told me that it wouldn’t work with me being queer and that I needed to pray harder,” he sighed. Because Taj had been assigned female at birth and hadn’t yet come out as trans, some people took issue with his attraction to women. “That hurt. I left, and I thought of myself as an atheist for a while after that.”

By the time he got to college, he had begun to feel an internal tension between the LGBTQ+ advocacy he was so passionate about and the faith that he’d held on to when he was younger. “I was involved in a lot of queer organizing, but I felt like I didn’t really fit because I had this faith background thing, and people weren’t super into that in college. So trying to figure out my place was always a bit of a struggle.” He finally found a group of progressive Christians at his school who were feeling similar tensions, and Taj began to believe that it might be possible to regain some faith and hold his two worlds together.

It was his experience with the United Church of Christ congregation that finally made that connection possible. Taj smiled when he remembered the avalanche of change during that year:

I tend to say that my transition and my experience of religion in that church are inseparable. I came out as trans in that church, and I came out the same year I decided I wasn’t going to go to law school, and I was going to go to seminary instead; so it was kind of this whole big shift in schema. It was like God was saying, “Everything you’re doing right now? You need to stop that. You need to do all of these other things that you want to do, but think you can’t.”

In fact, when I asked Taj if he could remember a time in his life when he felt totally loved and affirmed as his authentic self, he told me about an experience he’d had in this UCC congregation:

The first Sunday I went back to my church after I came out as trans, I just remember standing in front of the table full of name tags, and staring at my name tag and thinking, “I can’t put that on.” I remember looking blank. And one of the greeters comes up to me and she says, “You need help finding your name tag?” And she laughed, and I laughed, and I said, “No, I think I need a new one.” And she just kind of looked at me, and so I said, “Yeah, I need a new one, like, forever.” And she went, “OK!”

And she got me a new tag and she said, “Why don’t you write your name on this one and we’ll have a new permanent one for you next week!” And she handed me an order of service and I went inside and thought, “That was the easiest thing ever!” That church became a safe haven for me. Being in that church throughout my entire transition, and growing with that church through that time, was so necessary for me. They were probably the most supportive people in my life, other than the handful of friends I had. Faith and my gender identity are so linked for me that I don’t know how to talk about one without talking about the other.

For Taj, this experience solidified his understanding of himself as a loved child of God and gave him the healthy foundation from which he could respond to his calling. He had finally found a group of people who could accompany him on his journey toward wholeness while nourishing his faith and relationship with God at the same time. These kinds of experiences—where trans people are fully affirmed by their church community—show more than tolerance and go beyond defense and apologetics. These experiences are life-giving in the most literal sense.

In John 10:1–18 Jesus describes himself as the Good -Shepherd—one of the most familiar and beloved metaphors in Christian tradition. Rather than acting like a bandit, who climbs over the fence and scares the sheep away, the Good Shepherd enters through the gate and calls the sheep by name, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. Jesus explains, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”¹

While some theologians believe the abundant life Jesus mentions here is in reference to life after death, others point to the numerous instances where Jesus works to improve the lives of people in the present. For example, think about the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand, which is the only miracle story that is told in all four Gospels. On that occasion Jesus asked the disciples to find food for the more than five thousand people who had gathered to hear him preach. Jesus felt a concern for the people because it was evening and nobody had eaten for most of the day. The disciples reported back to Jesus that there wasn’t any place nearby to get food and that the only meal among the masses consisted of five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus didn’t give another sermon about the

importance of spiritual food. He just went ahead and provided what people actually needed in that moment. Jesus blessed the food and told the disciples to pass it out among all the people. In the end there was enough for everyone, with twelve baskets of food left over—another lesson in abundance.

The respected theologian Justo González points out two important things about that story: first, that Jesus' blessing and breaking of the bread to feed the five thousand is very similar to the blessing and breaking of the bread at the Last Supper and, second, that Jesus' concern with physical human needs is a model for Christian communities. He says, "This is a story about feeding, not just about rituals or religious practices. ... If the feeding of the multitude is a sign of the feeding that takes place at Communion and in the final banquet of the kingdom, then the feeding that takes place at Communion must be a sign of a faith community that actually feeds the hungry and responds to human need."²

So if Jesus says he comes so that his flock might have abundant life, what does that mean for transgender Christians? And if that abundant life includes caring for human needs like food, shelter, clothing, and medical care as well as spiritual care, what does that mean for churches?

Let's take those questions one at a time. First, if Jesus came to bring abundant life to all who follow him, that means that transgender Christians should be able to stop spending every single bit of their energy defending themselves against those "clobber passages," in order to concentrate instead on becoming better disciples. We should be able to move from survival practices to thriving faith. Jesus didn't come to make things marginally more bearable. He came to give us abundant and eternal life or, as scholar Robert Kysar puts it, "the peculiar quality of life resulting from a proper self-understanding in Christ that cannot be annihilated by death."³ If transgender Christians could move beyond apologetics, we would have more time and resources to devote to spreading the gospel, to providing help to the needy, to confronting injustices, to dismantling racism, to serving our neighbor, to praying, to practicing kindness, and to loving God.

When I asked Taj what moving past a focus on apologetics and toward abundant life would look like for him, he suggested that the next move might be what he calls "liberating the text." "Apologetics has to exist because the Bible is gendered uniquely in favor of male bodies," he explained. "So dismantling that [hierarchical] structure in the text so that it can't be recreated in the church is important."

So, for instance, when we read a translation of the Bible that always refers to God as “he,” that subconsciously suggests that we ascribe male attributes to God, which in turn equates maleness with godliness. Taj suggested that by liberating the text from references to God as male we remind ourselves that God is beyond human constructions of gender, while also keeping ourselves from instituting sexism in our churches and using the Bible as an excuse.

But as wonderful as it might be to move beyond apologetics, Taj makes a good point when he says that there’s a good reason for apologetics to exist. Trans people still do the work of defending themselves theologically, because not all Christians have had the opportunity to educate themselves about trans issues, and with these Christians apologetics are warranted. These Christians may have questions and doubts and misunderstandings that are worth the time and energy spent in good conversation and relationship-building. In other cases, though, trans folks are forced into defending themselves because a church or an individual Christian absolutely won’t consider affirming them or helping them in any way. This is when Jesus’ response to human need gives us a command to act.

So how can Christians—both individually and as church communities—help transgender people access abundant life? First, we have to remember that “abundant life” does not mean “a life of abundance.” Jesus is not saying that Christians should want or expect hundred-dollar bills and membership in the yacht club. What Jesus says is that he brings us life in abundance—more life than you can shake a stick at! So much life that you can’t take it all in! Beyond just more life, Jesus is promising a better life. As scholar Brendan Byrne explains it, abundance “is not merely quantitative. The mission of the Son is to communicate to the world a qualitatively enhanced life: life that, beyond mere mortal existence, is a participation as ‘children of God.’”⁴

So what do transgender people need in order to experience life abundant in both quantity and quality? Anneliese Singh, a researcher and professor of counseling and human development at the University of Georgia, has spent years studying resilience among transgender populations. Resilience—the patterns of learned behavior and the access to resources that allow a person to cope with difficult circumstances—is especially important among groups that face discrimination and violence. She determined that there were five things that predicted high resilience for trans folks across the board: the ability to create and define your own sense of self; the recognition of your own self-worth; awareness of oppression, so that you can protect yourself; connection with a supportive community; and the cultivation of hope for the future.⁵ In light of this, we can

assume that Christians can help instill resilience by making sure trans folks can take the time to figure out and define their own gender identity; by reminding them that they are worthy of love and belonging as human beings and children of God; by actively dismantling the transphobia that undergirds their oppression; by inviting trans folks into our communities and making them feel welcome; and by walking with them and supporting them in their spiritual journey.

The importance of faith as a component of resilience is even more pronounced among trans people of color. Dr. Singh noted in a study of nonwhite trans people that

participants described their spirituality and having a sense of hope for the future as being integral aspects of their resilience. For most, being raised in religious homes was closely connected to how they understood their gender identity. ... However, some participants also experienced their families and/or religious institutions using religion to judge or “punish” them for their gender identity and expression. ... Participants reported they “returned” to their spiritual beliefs and spirituality to cope with traumatic life events. They noted that this connection helped them cultivate a sense of hope for the future despite the traumatic life events they experienced.⁶

As a Black trans man who has lived these connections, Taj Smith confirms the way trans folks often yearn for a relationship with God. “There’s so much hunger for spiritual development throughout the different trans communities I’ve been in. People are really seeking something that’s bigger than them, whatever that is. They know that there’s something that propelled them into transition and into embracing who they truly are, but a lot of times they can’t encounter that in a church because of the dogma that gets in the way.”

Too often the church is a stumbling block that catches the feet of trans people on the road to God, rather than the sanctuary that houses the fountain of living water.

When I asked Taj what he imagined when he thought about the concept of abundant life, he pointed directly to the importance of a spiritual family:

Abundant life looks like community. It looks like the celebration of people as people, and not as numbers to fill pews. I find that there are churches I go to where I know people are talking to me because (a) I’m a

young adult, or (b) because I'm Black, or (c) because I'm part of some other diversity initiative. But when people are just genuinely welcoming, and when people do their best to welcome you and situate you in the community as you are, that's really what it looks like—to have a community to come home to, and to be able to say, “Yes, I'm a part of that.” Isolation, to me, is what death is.

Part of becoming truly integrated into a community is figuring out what your role might be—what part of the body of Christ you represent. Each person in a community has a unique perspective and distinct gifts, and it can be hard to toe the line between accidentally tokenizing people and instead appreciating the things that make them different. Taj nodded when I tried to articulate this tricky situation. He agreed that he didn't want to be seen as just the Black person, or just the trans person:

My role and my perspective is going to be different than the person sitting next to me because of the way I'm perceived in the world. I feel like I'm looking at the world from a really unique vantage point, especially at this moment in history. I see the world as a Black man, but I've also seen the world as a Black woman. I think about what it looks like to have the privilege to pass, and to be able to fly under the radar, and how I bring these perspectives to whatever community that I'm in.

In the beginning Taj wasn't sure if his new UCC church home would be able to appreciate the different perspectives he brought to the table, and if they couldn't accept those, he wasn't sure whether he'd be able to find a role in the community. As it turned out, though, the church was ready and willing to find ways to support him, even if they weren't instinctively sure what to do.

I felt so affirmed when I was approached by someone from my church and invited to join the men's group. I didn't end up going because I wasn't sure if I would feel comfortable in that space at that time, but knowing that that was an option for me, and feeling like the community was really figuring out how to embrace me and love me—that meant so much. They loved me before I came out, and I knew that, but I didn't love myself before, so I was hard to hold on to. But after coming out and starting the transition process I could say, “Hey, this is me coming into myself,” and then to feel really seen by people in the church, who were

much older than I am and who were predominantly white—it felt so good! Those people were showing up!

This is when trans Christians experience life in abundance—when they are welcomed into community; when they are loved for all of who they are; when their differences are respected; when they know they can count on their community to help with their daily human needs; and when they feel safe enough to drop their defenses in order to take on Jesus’ gentle yoke of discipleship. That may sound like a lot to ask of a church, but in reality these are commitments we try to make to the cisgender members of our communities. So why not include trans folks? After all, if the life Jesus promises is abundant, surely there’s enough to go around!

Does Gender Matter Anymore?

When it comes to baptism, I was kind of a late bloomer. When I was born, my parents were attending a nondenominational church that didn't practice infant baptism, and by the time I was old enough to make the choice myself, I wasn't sure I believed in Christianity anymore. In high school I spent a lot of time shadowing the other kids in my youth group as they went through the Lutheran practice of confirmation, and I watched them struggle with their questions and their doubts. I had a lot of doubts myself, but they all revolved around two central points.

The first question I had was, "Can I be baptized if I don't believe every single piece of Christian doctrine?" After quite a few long conversations with my pastor, he finally gave me an answer that I could live with. He told me that Christians hold the church's beliefs and creeds like one of those colorful parachutes you play with in kindergarten. Everybody takes a hold of a piece of the edge, and together we can carry and lift heavy things placed in the middle. Sometimes the people around you take up some of the slack for you, and at other times you carry a little more weight for them, but together we can keep the whole thing balanced. In short, he told me that I didn't have to believe every single piece of Christian doctrine myself; I had a community to help me hold the faith.

The second question I wrestled with in high school was, "Would the church still want me if they knew I was ... different?" At the time I knew I was bisexual, and I knew something was up with my gender, but that was about all I had to go on. It felt that if the people in my church found out that I didn't fit a heterosexual, cisgender mold, they wouldn't want me anymore, and they'd either rescind the baptism offer or require that I straighten myself out. That fear stuck

with me for a long time. I decided not to be baptized or confirmed during high school, but kept studying as I went away to college, determined to understand why I felt such a call to Scripture and to theology. Finally, when I was twenty years old, I came across a passage that provided an answer to my second question about belonging: “For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:26–28).

When I read these verses for the first time, I felt something click into place. The connection to baptism, negating gender as a barrier to acceptance, the metaphor of adoption into a faith family: this all spoke directly to my heart. I decided that this would be my baptismal memory verse, and I headed back home from college to ask my old pastor about setting a date. On June 22, 2008, I was baptized in front of the people who had walked with me throughout my faith journey.

In 2016, eight years later, I was invited to come back to my home church to tell the story of my transition. As I stood in front of the congregation reliving the time I spent in youth group, in choir, in the pastor’s office, on service trips, and over tea with amazing friends, I realized none of my fears had come true. I had been able to hold on to my edge of the big faith parachute. I had been able to find Christian communities that knew who I was as a transgender man, and who accepted me. I had been able to bring my whole self to God and to the church. Or rather, I hadn’t done all these things. I had just followed the breadcrumbs from the communion table that God kept dropping along the way. I just kept knocking on the door of the kingdom, and God kept opening up.

Galatians 3:28 isn’t the only verse in the Bible that seems to downgrade the importance of gender in Christian identity. In fact, this same “neither X nor Y” formula shows up several times in the letters attributed to the apostle Paul, and it’s always paired with a reference to baptism. New Testament scholar Wayne Meeks believes that Galatians 3:28 is actually a core part of a pre-Pauline baptismal formula—like a prayer that was said over every new Christian as they were baptized—and points out that the same “unification of opposites” is found in 1 Corinthians 12:13 and Colossians 3:11.¹ It was apparently pretty important to early Christians that things like gender, ethnicity, and social status not be

recognized as barriers to inclusion or to a relationship with God. But why was it so important to the Galatians?

To understand why Paul included these words in this particular letter, we have to zoom out a bit to what was happening in the new Christian church in Galatia. Essentially, Paul had come to Galatia and ministered to the Gentile people there, eventually baptizing them and helping them to get a community going, before he left to start churches elsewhere. While he was with them, he stressed that it wasn't necessary to become Jewish before becoming Christian—an idea that may seem silly to us today, but was a serious issue in the first century. Jesus himself had been a Jew, his twelve disciples were all Jewish, and Jesus' tendency to eat with Gentiles was scandalous at the time. It wasn't until the Holy Spirit started showing up to all kinds of people all over the place in the book of Acts that the disciples eventually decided that it was OK for Gentiles to become Christians. Still, a few of Jesus' original followers thought that Gentiles should have to keep the same laws and cultural customs that the Jewish people did. They argued that Christian Gentile men should at least have to be circumcised, as all Jewish men were, and as Jesus himself was.

Paul pushed back on that, and said that being circumcised was not necessary for inclusion in Christ's church, that the only thing necessary for inclusion was belief. Soon after he'd left the church in Galatia, the Galatians started writing to him, telling him that other Christians had come and said they must all be circumcised. You can imagine the panic and confusion they felt about this news. It seemed as if they must either fix themselves by being circumcised and leaving behind many of the customs that made them Galatians, or leave Christianity. It was a tough choice.

So that's where we are when Paul shows up on the scene with his words in Galatians 3. He points the people of Galatia to Abraham as an example, because God blessed and chose Abraham when Abraham wasn't circumcised. Therefore, nobody had the right to deny that God had also blessed the Galatians, even though *they* weren't circumcised. In the end, Paul says, circumcision isn't good or bad. It's just a social custom, not one that's going to get in the way of your relationship with God or your inclusion in the kingdom. In the end, there is no longer Jew or Greek (circumcised or uncircumcised), no longer slave or free, no longer male and female, for we are all one once we're joined with Christ in baptism.

But Paul's assertion here raises another question: if we're all one in Christ, then do these distinctions between genders, races, ethnicities, and classes matter

at all?

For Lynn Young, Paul's words in Galatians 3:26–28 regarding social customs are pure gospel. Paul insists that belief and response to God's call—not conforming to cultural mores—are the hallmarks of inclusion. That means a lot to someone who is not only Christian but also Native American—someone who's not just male or female, but is Two Spirit.

Lynn, who uses the pronouns ze, zir, and zirs, has been walking a blended path that encompasses Christian belief and Native practices for many years. Ze explained, “Spiritually, I identify as a Native American Traditionalist Christian. These identities exist side by side. Neither is subservient to the other. They work synergistically together, and I really believe that I couldn't be the person of faith that I am or the Christian that I am without this integration.”

But Lynn didn't always know about zir Native heritage, and didn't always have the connection with Christianity that ze has today. “I was born and raised in a family that was casually United Methodist, and so it was those kinds of liturgies and things that I was familiar with. I knew when to stand and when to say the Apostles' Creed and knew all those things by heart, but none of it felt like it had anything to do with me. It didn't really impact who I was. As a young child and into my mid-teens I was a victim of sexual abuse, and so the idea that there was this all-knowing, all-loving God character didn't make sense to me. I didn't deny the existence of God, but the idea that God was an entity that gave a crap about the day-to-day doings of people in general, and me specifically, wasn't anything that I understood.”

It wasn't until a family trip up to the north shore of Lake Superior that Lynn had any meaningful connection with God. Ze remembers it vividly:

I was about six or seven, and I was sitting on this giant slab of rock in northern Minnesota with my feet in this icy stream, and I remember feeling so energized and so plugged in to something so much bigger than myself that I could not articulate, but that I could not deny. It was something that deserved and received my awe and reverence and curiosity and devotion. It was something that was a saving force for me. I was grounded into a bigger system into which I belonged. It didn't reach out a mystical hand and snatch me out of a bad situation, but it embraced me and comforted me and it said, “You belong.” So that presence has been part of my life up until this moment. That is who I am.

And so as I became aware of my Native heritage about twenty years ago, that made total sense to me. I started to understand why I felt the way I do, because I really do believe that our bodies carry generational memories.

Lynn's mother was Native American, but she had been adopted as a baby and didn't have any connection to that culture, which meant that Lynn didn't know anything about her Native roots until she did some digging herself as an adult.

My mom's people are the Oglala Lakota, who are from the plains in North and South Dakota. Since I live in Indiana, I'm not connected so much with the Oglala Lakota who are currently living on their homeland in the plains, but I'm very connected to the intertribal Native community here in Indiana. Our group here is made up of a bunch of Native folks from different tribal affiliations who find themselves in community because of location. We're Cherokee, Potawatomi, Miami, Lakota, and Huron.

Lynn was blessed to find a group of people who had similar experiences and histories, and even in seminary, where she is currently pursuing a ministry degree preparing for service in the United Church of Christ, Lynn has found kindred souls. "I've met several people in my Christian journey that are also connected in the same way. For instance, in my current field placement in seminary, my supervising pastor is of Cherokee descent, but studied for six years with a Lakota elder."

As one might guess, the intersection of Christian and Native identities can be a tricky thing to navigate because of the colonization and genocide that Native people faced at the hands of European Christians. Richard Twiss, another Native Christian, has spoken about the way he was taught to understand Galatians 3:28:

One afternoon I asked one of the pastoral leaders how I was supposed to relate to my Native culture as a Christian. I distinctly remember him opening the Bible he was carrying. He read from Galatians 3:28 where Paul said, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (NIV). After reading it he commented on how cultures should all blend together for us as Christians, and then concluded by saying, "So, Richard, don't worry

about being Indian anymore—just be like us.” ... I believed that church leader. I really had no choice, being a new Christian, and he, being in a position of spiritual power/authority, gave an answer from the Bible about cultures. So for the next twelve years I lived the Christian life as it was culturally modeled for me by non-Native friends and Christian brethren—something I later found to be less than I am, and much less than the Lord Jesus wants me to be!²

This was the same bind that the church in Galatia found themselves in back in the first century—right in the tension between diverse ethnicities and a collective identity in Christ. There are two ways to interpret what Paul says in Galatians 3:28 about our being one in Christ: either it means that we’re all whitewashed and homogenized and our differences are erased, as Richard’s pastor declared, or it means that we’re called to find a way to make our different identities fit together, like the bright shards in assorted colors that make up the stained glass windows of a cathedral. Are we called to sameness, or are we called to oneness?³

Randy Woodley, another Native theologian, argues for the latter option. He says, “Paul’s argument in the book of Galatians for freedom in Christ applies to cultural divisions, too. The purpose of worshipping God in our own culture is so that we may be free in the expression of our devotion. How often I have seen Native American elders attending a worship service and been brought to tears as they expressed deep appreciation for seeing Jesus ‘finally worshipped in our own Indian ways.’”⁴

Some people Lynn meets don’t understand the way ze holds together these pieces of Native spirituality and Christian faith. “Some of my Native Traditionalist friends who are dear, beloved people to me, don’t get how in the world I could ever identify as Christian, because that is the religion of our oppressors, the religion of the people who tried to kill us, and did kill our ancestors, and that’s all true. But that’s not Christ’s fault.” Of course, there are always the Christians who believe Lynn should get rid of zir Native heritage, the same way Richard’s pastor suggested he forget his. I told Lynn, “You know, it seems hard enough to hold two things together like that when people don’t understand. How on earth do you also find the heart to openly identify as Two Spirit—something else that most people don’t get?”

Lynn laughed and said,

One of the many ways I've tried to explain my gender journey to people who don't get it is to say that, as I began to really dig into it and explore it and find the meaningful points for me, I felt like I was given this dirty floor and a toothbrush. As I started to scrub this floor I started seeing things, and as things were revealed, it turned out that this floor was an amazing mosaic, even though each piece by itself didn't seem to be anything in particular. None of those pieces are unimportant because they all have to exist together to create the whole picture. So I've arrived at this place of knowing myself as a Two Spirit person, and that Two Spirit is my gender. There's a feminine part of me, and a masculine part of me, and there are also parts of me that are so intertwined that are both of those and then some, and they don't have a name that fits within European gender constructs.

The term "Two Spirit" (also written "two-spirit") was first coined by Native Americans and members of the First Nations tribes of Canada back in 1990 to create a cohesive English term for Native sexualities and gender identities that have existed in multiple tribes for centuries.⁵ Though it originally served as a Native-specific identifier for gay and lesbian individuals, it soon broadened to include Native transgender people and those with gender expressions that didn't fit their cultural norm. It also replaced the term "berdache," which had been used by white anthropologists to refer to any Native person of any tribe who seemed to diverge from heterosexual and cisgender expectations.⁶ These days Two Spirit people are speaking for themselves, forming organizations all over North America, and carving out their own niche in modern Native life.

Lynn first recognized zir Two Spirit identity when ze accompanied a friend to the Philadelphia Transgender Health Conference. As soon as ze stepped through the door,

it was like I had been looking at the world through a straw and somebody said, "Oh honey, put that down." And I thought, "Wow! Look at all these wonderful people living their authentic lives in ways that I would never have dreamt of." It was like this domino effect started in me that made me question everything and not take anything for granted. And I was asking all these questions, and I met several Two Spirit people there that first year. I realized that I didn't have to be male or

female. I realized I could be a mosaic of things. And as I explored that culturally with some folks and as I read more, I finally got it.

We have all these shards of identity in us, whether it's our sexuality, our gender, our faith, our age, our cultural identity, our personal trauma histories—all of those things that are part of who we are combine to create our whole identity. I'm not just one piece—I'm not just the Christian, or just the Native person, or just Two Spirit, or just the survivor, or just the grandma—that small piece isn't me; only the whole reflects who I am. I am all of this.

So what was Paul thinking about these different pieces of our identity when he penned Galatians 3:28? And what does this verse mean for our understanding of gender? Was Paul saying that gender was no longer important—that through our baptism in Christ our gender identities were all erased or irrelevant? I very much doubt it. What Paul said about gender in this verse was revolutionary in that it confirmed that there was no patriarchy or misogyny in God's new kingdom; it broke down the barriers between genders and between people of different genders and God. But Paul still upheld the gender binary in the rest of his letters.

Wayne Meeks directs our attention to Paul's beliefs about gender expression and gender roles in other parts of the New Testament: "Paul insists on the preservation of the symbols of the present, differentiated order. Women remain women and men remain men and dress accordingly, even though 'the end of the ages has come upon them.' Yet these symbols have lost their ultimate significance, for 'the form of this world is passing away.'"⁷ So essentially, Meeks believes that when Paul talks about gender in his letters, he's telling people to keep their gender presentation as culturally normal as possible, because that kingdom revolution God promised hasn't happened yet. At the same time, he's telling Christians that in certain ways they should act as if that kingdom is already here.

Confused yet? I wouldn't blame you! This is one of the mysteries of life as a Christian: we are citizens of two worlds at once. We're human beings who live in a time when things like gender, class, and race are all important to our understandings of ourselves and each other; yet we're also called to be part of a new kingdom where things like sexism, poverty, slavery, and racism no longer exist. Geerhardus Vos, the father of Reformed biblical theology, once called this mystery "the already but not yet." God's new vision for the world is already

being enacted and is already transforming us, but it hasn't fully arrived, and it's nowhere near done turning things upside down.

In the meantime, what Galatians 3:28 calls us to remember is that even though our gender identities matter, they don't get between us and God. As Lynn explained,

This isn't about not using labels. I feel like there are ways in which labels are really important, because if they're freeing for you—if they're tools of liberation for you—use them. But which label you use? That doesn't matter to God, in terms of whether or not God loves you or accepts you. Free or slave, Greek, Jew, male and female—none of that gets in the way. And if the Scripture enumerates all of those things, then I have to believe sexuality and gender identity have got to be part of that same paradigm. A whole paradigm is being named, not just the few categories named here.

In Wayne Meeks's history of the Galatians 3:28 formula, he ends by admitting that maybe Paul's vision of unity through diversity in Christ was too revolutionary—and maybe even too dangerous—for his time. You can imagine a sparkle in Meeks's eye, though, when he finishes by saying, “The declaration that in Christ there is no more male and female faded into innocuous metaphor, perhaps to await the coming of its proper moment.”⁸

What better moment than this to begin reminding Christians of the oneness we inherit through our baptism? What better teachers of strength in diversity could we have than people like Lynn, whose very lives are made up of many different identities sewn together with the threads of the Holy Spirit? Perhaps it is time to edge the “not yet” closer to the “now.”

Conclusion

The Trans-Affirming Toolbox

In Luke chapter 15 we find Jesus doing what he did best: talking and eating with sinners. The religious authorities of Jesus' time are criticizing him for this lax behavior and judging him by the company he keeps. In response to their concerns, Jesus tells this story:

“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

(Luke 15:4–7)

Many of us probably heard this story for the first time as children—it's a Sunday school favorite, and for good reason! It's incredibly comforting to imagine yourself as the lost sheep, riding back home on Jesus' shoulders after an exciting but ill-advised adventure. There are times when this story is exactly the gospel message we need—when we need to hear that we are worthy of God's love, and that God will risk anything to have us back home again.

But what if we imagined this story a different way? What if the lost sheep didn't wander away from the safety and goodness of the shepherd? What if it

was just trying to escape the cruelty of the flock? Sheep will occasionally pick out a flock member who doesn't fit in—maybe because of an injury or a strange marking—and they'll chase that individual away. There are times when I think Christians need to see ourselves more in the ninety-nine sheep who stayed put, and ask ourselves if we may have been part of the reason that the lost sheep got lost in the first place.

I don't mean to lay on the guilt too heavily here—in reality, we all have lost-sheep days and flock-sheep days—but I think this metaphor holds up. Christians have been driving LGBTQ+ people away from the church for decades—and then asking us why we won't come back and repent. Take a look at what Jesus does with this situation, though. He leaves the ninety-nine sheep behind to go in search of the one who needs help. This is such a powerful metaphor because it goes against everything we've been taught about the greater good. Any economist will tell you the shepherd should cut his losses and move on!

But what's at stake for Jesus in this situation isn't just that one single lost sheep, and it's not just the ninety-nine back home. It's the integrity of the flock as a whole. Saving just the main group or just the individual wouldn't do any good, because the flock is more than just the sum of its parts. When Jesus goes after that lost sheep, what he's telling the flock—what he's telling us—is that we're not complete without each other.

In this book, transgender Christians have shared their stories and the ways that Scripture, faith, and gender identity interact in their lives. I hope you've been able to read these stories and come to the same conclusion the shepherd did: that our faith communities and churches aren't complete without trans folks and their experiences.

At the messy, lovable, chaotic potluck that is life in the church, transgender Christians have a lot to bring to the table. We can help the church see Scripture through different lenses; we can help other Christians understand their own gender identities; we can help to break down barriers created by sexism and misogyny; we can remind people of the diversity of God's creation, and of God's unlimited nature; we can stand in the gaps and bridge middle spaces where others may be uncomfortable or uninformed; we can help make connections between the sacred and the secular, making the church more relevant for the world, and we can provoke people into asking questions about themselves and about God that they may never have thought to ask before.¹ And that's all while most churches still don't affirm our existence as Christians! Imagine what we could do if we worked together!

So let's talk about how the flock can be brought back together again. It always helps to have some examples to follow, so let's take a look at a few churches and ministry organizations that are doing great things.

- In June of 2017, The United Methodist Church commissioned their first nonbinary deacon—our own M Barclay from [chapter 4](#).² M joins transgender clergy serving openly in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church, the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, and the United Church of Christ.
- Pastors like Jeffrey Dirrim are starting church ministries that reach out to homeless transgender youth, providing community, food and supplies, love, and affirmation.³
- Churches like the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fairbanks, Alaska, have started programs to help transgender people get their legal documents changed and raised money for the numerous fees inherent in the process.⁴
- Faith communities like First Congregational Church of Santa Barbara, California, have opened their doors and begun sharing space with transgender community centers and support groups.⁵

These individuals, churches, and communities are acting as Jesus' hands and feet in the world to a population that needs them. Even more than that, through their actions they're recognizing that transgender people are children of God, and part of this flock and family.

If you're wondering what your church can do to support the trans people in your community, why not begin by asking a few questions and taking stock of where your community is right now:

- *Education.* What steps has your community taken to become more knowledgeable about sexuality and gender identity?
- *Conversation.* What kind of spaces has your community made for internal conversations about gender identities and welcoming transgender members?
- *Consensus.* Has your community written any kind of statement of welcome or affirmation that explicitly includes transgender people?

- *Connection.* Is your community part of a nationwide LGBTQ+-affirmation program (ReconcilingWorks Lutherans, More Light Presbyterians, Reconciling Ministries Network United Methodists, Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, Call to Action Catholics, etc.)?
- *Follow through.* What concrete steps is your community taking each week, each month, or each year to support transgender people?

These questions can help you begin conversations with other community members and leaders in your church, but what about some concrete examples of those action steps? Here are a few suggestions to get you started:

- Create an advocacy group in your church that will commit to dialogue with your denominational governing body regarding trans inclusion.
- Hold a liturgy for Transgender Day of Remembrance (November 20 each year).⁶
- Offer continuing education classes on topics related to gender and gender identity.
- Have a presence at your nearest LGBTQ+ Pride celebration in June.
- Encourage participation and leadership of transgender people in the life of your church.
- Keep trans faith resources in the church library.
- Have liturgy available for name changes and remembrance of baptism for trans folks.
- Create a gender-neutral restroom in your church building.
- Include sexuality and gender identity in your nondiscrimination hiring policy.
- Use inclusive language (gender-neutral pronouns like the singular “they” for people whose gender identity you don’t know; “siblings in Christ” rather than “brothers and sisters,” etc.) in your sermons, liturgies, bulletins, and fliers.
- Create a community outreach plan that helps explain what your church is doing to welcome transgender people.
- Is there a piece of trans-exclusionary legislation on the table in your state or local government? Start an after-church letter-writing campaign and get involved in transgender-affirming political advocacy as a group.

- Make sure all church leaders—youth leaders especially—have had some training on gender-identity issues, so they can respond compassionately and knowledgeably when a transgender person visits your church, or when an existing member comes out.
- Include theological texts from transgender Christians in your teaching, preaching, and Bible studies.
- Include Bible stories of gender minorities like the ones found in this book in your youth curricula to help trans youth connect to their faith.
- Include LGBTQ+-ally training in your new member classes.

“All right, all right,” I hear you say. “Those are a lot of good ideas. But what if I’m not connected to an affirming church community right now? Is there something I can do as an individual?”

Absolutely! Whether you’re part of another kind of community that’s working toward trans inclusion, or whether you’re someone with a transgender coworker or a transgender family member, there are dozens of ways that you can support the trans people in your life. Here are just a couple of ideas:

- Educate yourself on the basics, and then keep going! You’re reading this book, so you’ve already made a great start. Scholarship regarding trans issues is growing all the time, and there’s always more to learn.
- Always use someone’s correct name and pronouns. If you’re not sure what pronouns someone uses, it’s more than OK to ask. If you make a mistake, just say you’re sorry and move on. There is no need to make a big deal about it.
- Read the work of transgender educators, theologians, and justice workers. (You can find many good examples in the Further Reading section.)
- Think about how you use gendered language in your everyday life, and about the times when you assume something about someone’s gender. Consider moving from greetings like “Good morning, ladies!” to “Good morning, folks!” when you’re meeting a new group of people.
- Practice interrupting negative conversation. If you hear someone speaking badly of a transgender person because of their gender identity, consider stepping in and explaining why that behavior isn’t OK.
- Be vocal about your support so that the people around you know it’s all right to express their own support, or even to come out to you if they

need a friend.

- Don't ask invasive questions about a person's body or about their birth name.
- Don't "out" someone by talking about their trans identity with others.
- Watch out for backhanded compliments! Phrases like "You're so pretty for a trans woman!" are actually much more harmful than they are kind.
- Get involved in policy change, and stay aware of possible trans-exclusionary laws in your state and local government. The website of the National Center for Transgender Equality is a great place to find out more about trans-related legislation.
- Offer to help transgender people navigate possibly unsafe spaces like bathrooms and locker rooms. Sometimes having a buddy with you is the difference between a fun night out and a trip to the hospital.
- Donate to organizations that help transgender people get access to affordable medical care, housing, safe jobs, and legal advice.

Now, for my transgender siblings. If you're a transgender person yourself, the resources you'll require will be different from the ones churches and cisgender allies need. The most important thing you can do for yourself as a trans Christian is to get connected to a community, either in person or online. In the Further Reading section of this book you'll find recommendations for online organizations that can get you started, and I'd highly recommend checking out Believe Out Loud's church locator, which allows you to search for trans-affirming churches by state, and even filter by denomination. Rest assured that more resources are being created every day, and every Sunday there's a new church opening its doors to people just like you. If you don't have access to a physical or online community of trans people of faith yet, know that there are organizations and individuals who are working every single day to bring those resources closer. You're not forgotten, and you're not alone.

Don't forget to practice some spiritual self-care. Most of us have experienced some form of rejection, and building spiritual resilience is a difficult thing to do even under the best circumstances. Let me tell you about three kinds of spiritual self-care that have helped me:

- *Reading the Psalms*. For every person who's ever felt like yelling at God or staying in bed all day crying, Psalms is the book for you. Alternately, if you've ever felt like dancing because you're just so happy to be alive,

or singing about how beautiful the sunrise was this morning, Psalms is *also* the book for you! This collection of 150 songs and poems is a great way to get into reading the Bible if you're not too sure where to start, and it's a collection that reminds you that you're not alone. No matter what emotion you're feeling right now, there's probably a psalm for it, and knowing that someone more than two thousand years ago understands something about how you feel can be incredibly encouraging.

- *Practicing Sabbath*. As a transgender Christian it's pretty likely that you spend a good amount of time defending yourself, educating people, and just trying to muddle through your own life. Being trans can be exhausting, and Scripture tells us that rest is not only good for us; it's good for our relationship with God. Taking time each day to journal your way into prayer or taking a day each week to unplug from all the bad news and outrage on social media can help you recharge and reconnect with who you are and how you experience God in the everyday.
- *Finding a dialogue partner*. It's way too easy to get stuck in our own heads when we're spending a lot of time thinking about faith and gender. There's an ancient practice of finding a dialogue partner to help you think things through and offer some outside views. That partner can come in the form of a friend, a therapist, a spiritual adviser, a pastor, or even a journal that you keep yourself. Allowing ourselves to ask scary questions about what we believe is actually a profound opportunity for growth, and getting those words outside of ourselves in some way can help us lay down our worries in preparation for that Sabbath rest.

Finally, don't be afraid to ask for help. If you're noticing a decline in your mental health, or even if you just need somebody to talk to, you can always reach out to others via Trans Lifeline, the crisis line made for trans people, by trans people. You can reach them at (877) 565-8860 in the United States and (877) 330-6366 in Canada. You can also talk with people via text or online chat through the other organizations you'll find listed in the Further Reading section under "Helplines."

As transgender Christians we often find ourselves stuck between a rock and a hard place. We may sometimes feel unwelcome in churches because of our gender identity, and sometimes unwelcome in LGBTQ+ spaces because of our faith. It can be a hard line to walk, but it can also be a joyful journey! There are so many transgender Christians out thriving in the world, and you've met just a

few of them here. I hope that their stories have given you a sense of what our future in communities of faith can look like. Together—and alongside those who fight to end racism, sexism, -xenophobia, and discrimination based on physical and mental ability—transgender Christians will continue to work for justice for all people. We will hold in our hearts the truth that civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer proclaimed: *Nobody's free until everybody's free.*

So what happens when transgender Christians are able to flourish and find community, and when churches are able to see the gifts that those trans Christians bring? First, the rates of violence against transgender people fall, because Christian groups are no longer advocating trans-exclusionary viewpoints and legislation. Then, the minority stress that transgender people experience weakens, because they live amid a community that supports them spiritually, physically, and emotionally. People who once walked away from Christianity because of the church's negative treatment of LGBTQ+ individuals begin to come back, curious about the way grace is showing up in the midst of resurrected relationships.

The time and resources that once went into fighting this particular battle in the “culture wars” now go to summer lunches for school kids, building low-income housing, and welcome packages for refugee families. Transgender leaders, many of whom have experience in community organizing, begin to create outreach programs that take worship into local parks and retirement homes, rather than waiting for people to stumble into the sanctuary. The church grows, the gospel spreads, kids get to grow up in love and in safety, and justice begins to roll down like water.

Most importantly, when transgender Christians are accepted and celebrated in Christian communities, the Good Shepherd's flock is put back together, and we once again become more than the sum of our parts. We get a preview of God's kingdom here on earth, and Luke 15 tells us there is rejoicing in heaven. We say yes, individually and communally, to the love of God that seeks to bind us together, and we are transformed.

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Soli Deo Gloria.

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The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline—United States: (800) 273-8255 (online chat available). <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>.

The Crisis Text Line—United States: Text START to 741-741—<http://www.crisistextline.org/>.

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- Colage*—Support for people with LGBTQ+ parents. <https://www.colage.org/>.
- Gender Spectrum*—Support for LGBTQ+ youth and families. <https://www.genderspectrum.org/>.
- The Institute for Welcoming Resources*—An ecumenical group pushing LGBTQ+ church inclusion forward. <http://www.welcomingresources.org/>.
- Many Voices*—A Black Church Movement for Gay & Transgender Justice. www.manyvoices.org/.
- The National Center for Trans Equality*—Advocacy and public policy organization. <http://www.transquality.org/>.
- PFLAG*—Support for LGBTQ+ people and their families. <https://www.pflag.org/>.
- Queer Grace*—An LGBTQ+ faith encyclopedia. www.queergrace.com/.
- Queer Theology*—Resources and community for LGBTQ+ Christians. <https://www.queertheology.com/>.
- Refuge Restrooms*—App for finding gender-neutral, safe bathrooms. <http://www.refugerestrooms.org/>.
- The Sylvia Rivera Law Project*—Legal help for transgender people. <https://srlp.org/>.
- TransFaith*—Information and community for LGBTQ+ people of all faiths. www.transfaithonline.org/.
- The Transgender Law Center*—Legal advocacy and policy change. <https://transgenderlawcenter.org/>.
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"Funny, smart, and brilliantly paced!
Colby has written *that* book." —**Rob Bell**

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CLOBBER

RETHINKING OUR MISUSE OF
THE BIBLE ON HOMOSEXUALITY



Colby MARTIN

Foreword by Glennon Doyle Melton

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Foreword by Glennon Doyle Melton

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Acknowledgments

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INTRODUCTION



THE ORIGIN OF UNCLOBBER

UnClobber ... Did You Make That Up?

Why yes, yes I did. Which made it that much easier to trademark.

UnClobber is my attempt to say, in one word, that I do not believe that God stands opposed to those who are attracted to the same sex, or that God withholds divine blessing from a same-sex relationship. *UnClobber* came out of my desire to reverse the damage of the so-called “Clobber Passages.”

At some point within the past few decades the term “Clobber Passage” was coined because, well, I imagine being told that you are an abomination destined for the fires of hell and responsible for catastrophes like earthquakes and AIDS is probably a feeling similar to being clobbered over the head with a large object. There are approximately six verses (out of 31,000) in Scripture that appear to reference same-sex sex acts, and our gay brothers and sisters have long felt the brunt of these six verses as the Christian church has historically used them to deny the LGBTQ community a seat at the Table of God, as full recipients of grace, and as full participants in the body of Christ.

So I want to UnClobber those who identify as gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, or queer. I want them to hear a different voice. One that says, “You are loved just as you are, by God and by me.” But it’s not just me, there are millions of Christians around the world who are desperate for their gay brothers and sisters to know that we see them, we believe in them, and we have their backs. I want them to hear that the Bible does not condemn them, as they’ve been led to believe. I want them to hear that their spot at the Table is open, it has been reserved for them, and in fact it’s probably a chair or two closer to where Jesus is

sitting because of all the unwarranted persecution they have endured at the hands of churches, pastors, and Christian organizations.

I want to them to hear a better story so that they can live a better story.

Speaking of Story ...

In addition to unpacking the Clobber Passages, I want to tell you part of my story.

It's a story of how I found alignment between my head and my heart regarding the Bible and homosexuality. But beyond that, once those two realities lined up, it launched me to a more expansive journey of seeking that head-heart alignment in my ministry as a pastor and, indeed, my life as a whole. While my inner convictions were heading in one direction, my vocational situation remained entrenched in a more conservative evangelical environment.

This book, then, is about seeking a faith community where I could be a pastor who studies the Scriptures, worships and follows Jesus, recites the ancient creeds, builds authentic relationships between people from all walks of life, and opens the doors to welcome, affirm, and celebrate the LGBTQ community.

Part of my story involves some difficult truth-telling as I talk about the challenges I faced coming out as a straight ally. It was not a popular move. But my goal is not to shame or judge those who felt differently and who did harm to me in the process. Rather, I want to be honest about what I've gone through in my pursuit of an aligned life. To that end, if I felt that a particular story does not edify the person or place in question, I have changed their names for the sake of anonymity.

Where Did UnClobber Come From?

In a handful of videos on YouTube, I engage the topic of homosexuality in the Bible. One in particular has more than 400 comments on it, which are split fairly evenly between supportive encouragement and hell-fire damnation. Here is a quote from one person who commented recently: "Colby, [you say] you studied the Bible and could not find God's Holy Word to be against homosexual sin? Are you kidding me? The Bible is crystal clear on same sex unions. You must have missed these verses ..." He/She/It (unsurprisingly, the commenter was anonymous) goes on to copy and paste the "Clobber Passages."

This is not the first time I've received a reaction like this, nor will it be the last (more on that in chapter 10). For many non-affirming Christians, the Bible appears so clear on its stance toward homosexuality that the only reasonable conclusion is that affirming Christians, like myself, "must have missed" verses. I've written this book, in part, to show that I, and others like me, have surely not missed any verses.

When I came out of the theological closet, I began dialoguing with friends on Facebook about my new beliefs. Inevitably, people asked about my take on the "Clobber Passages." It wasn't long before I realized that Facebook threads are not the best format for exploring controversial Bible verses, so I told everyone to wait while I composed a series of blog posts to articulate my beliefs. The blog series (wherein I came up with the term, *UnClobber*) grew into a series of video lectures, and eventually formed the foundation for this book.

Who Is UnClobber For?

If you feel the church has been wrong to demonize and reject the LGBTQ community, but you're still pretty confident the Bible condemns homosexuality, then *UnClobber* is for you.

If you feel drawn to a more inclusive Christian faith, but are held back by what you've been taught about the Bible, then *UnClobber* is for you.

If you have close friends or family members who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer, and you love them with your whole heart, but your view of the Bible prevents you from fully celebrating them, then *UnClobber* is for you.

If you're already an affirming Christian, but are struggling to articulate what you believe about the "Clobber Passages," then *UnClobber* is for you.

If you are LGBT or Q and you grew up in a Christian home or are drawn toward faith in Christ, but you have been told—and maybe believe—that God sees you as less than, or despises you, or expects you to remain celibate or try and become straight, then *UnClobber* is for you.

If you're a Christian leader who is curious about how a straight, white, formerly conservative evangelical pastor came to an affirming position and now leads a progressive Christian church, then *UnClobber* is for you.

Some of you might be reading this solely for the chapters on the "Clobber Passages." If that is you, read the even-numbered chapters (2, 4, 6, 8, and 10). Others might be more interested in the story of how I came to align my head and

my heart on homosexuality and the Bible. If so, read the odd-numbered chapters (1, 3, 5, 7, and 9).

My hope is that some of you might find yourself in my story. Perhaps you can relate when I talk about the season of my life when I believed that homosexuality was a sin, but also felt it was the church's job to love and accept the gay community, not condemn and reject them. Or the season of my life when my inner convictions made me feel out of place with those with whom I worked and was in community. Some of you will undoubtedly relate to the loss and rejection I endured as a result of my coming out as an ally for the LGBTQ community. Others may not find themselves in my story in particular, but through reading *UnClobber* you discover that the Bible you have held dear for so long has been leveraged to condemn an entire segment of the population based on the misuse of half a dozen poorly translated and poorly understood Bible verses. More than all of that, though, I want you to receive hope that your life holds the potential for abundant life when you travel the often-frightening but always-liberating path toward becoming on the outside who you are on the inside.

So walk with me, would you? As I go from a poster boy of conservative evangelicalism, to a conflicted theologian, to an open and affirming Christian, to a fired pastor, to a lost and searching spiritual sojourner, and finally to a co-conspirator for a faith community where the unimaginable comes to life.

I'll begin with the prayer that I say before every sermon I preach,

Lord, if there is anything I'm about to say that is good, true, or helpful for those on their journey of faith, I pray that it sticks in our minds and clings to our hearts. But if there is anything I'm about to say that is untrue, or would be unhelpful for any in their journey, may your grace allow us to forget it the moment we hear it. Amen.

PROLOGUE



*Summer of 2005
Portland, Oregon*

After months of preparation, my vocational identity hinged on the answer to one more question. I glanced at my wife, relieved that I had made it this far. But I knew what was still to come, as though they saved the juiciest for last.

Kate and I left our new baby at home to make the seventy mile drive north to the district headquarters. This was where young prospects like me came to be interviewed by a panel of seasoned ministers. It was the final step to become a licensed minister in my denomination. Already the interview had lasted more than three hours, which was two hours longer than I was told it typically took.

The room was small, but its high ceilings gave it importance. The decor was noticeably dated, yet it felt warm and familiar. The contrasting floral patterns on virtually every surface reminded me of visiting my grandmother when I was young. As I turned back to the panel of four ministers, I wondered if any of them had perhaps been interviewed in this same room decades ago, back when the furnishings would have been considered new and trendy. They had all been kind and gracious to Kate and me, doling out their questions about the denomination's views on Christology, soteriology, eschatology, and every other-ology imaginable.

For the past five years I had been working toward, and dreaming of, this moment, when at last I could be called "Pastor." Not that I wanted anyone to actually call me "Pastor Colby." That wasn't it. I felt the formality of such a name ought to be reserved for those with more years under their belts. But oh, how I longed to receive affirmation from an institution that deemed me fit to be a pastor within their organization.

As I sat there, waiting for their final line of questioning, I was anxious that my recently shaken faith might have doomed this interview from the get-go. Had I sat on that rose-colored, rose-patterned loveseat six months prior, at the height of my evangelical training, I'm confident I would have sailed through in thirty minutes, reciting each doctrinal nuance with ease and conviction. It was possible that even to the panel, in that moment, I appeared as a poster boy for the millennial pastor. But a few of my answers to their questionnaire, filled out prior to the interview, raised some red flags. Maybe I wasn't what I appeared.

So they pressed in. And I gave honest responses that eased the uncertainty for their first two flags. Ruth, the eldest minister, with her disarming smile, flipped a few pages and looked my way. Here came the third.

"Colby," she said, "why don't you explain for us your response to question 37 on page 4."

I didn't need to turn there. I knew what she meant.