

Gender Identity and the Bible

Introduction

“Sex” and “gender” are terms that are often used interchangeably, however, there are some very important differences. Throughout this leaflet we will use “sex” to refer to the biological/physical characteristics that are used to define someone as either male or female and we will use “gender” to refer to how a person understands, presents, performs and identifies with the binary construct of sex as male/female. We will use the word “*trans**” as an inclusive umbrella term to refer to people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. It includes, but is not limited to: men and women with transsexual parts, and people who identify as transsexual, transgender, transvestite/cross dressing, androgyne, polygender, genderqueer, agender, intergender, gender variant or with any other gender identity and/or expression which is not standard male or female and express their gender through their choice of clothes, presentation or body modifications, including undergoing multiple surgical procedures and/or hormone treatments.

We also recognise “*Intersex*” as a specific medical condition and that the content of this leaflet may or may not be applicable. However, regardless of how a person understands their sex and/or gender they will receive a warm welcome at MCC North London.

As with the case of homosexuality there are only a few passages in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures (what we call the Old and New Testaments) that have any bearing on gender identity and only two that speaks to anything approaching the experience of many trans* people in the 21st Century.

“Cross Dressing and Genital Surgery”

“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 Almighty your God.” (Deuteronomy 22:5)

Most biblical scholars understand this rule to be aimed at preserving specific social or religious norms and not aimed at trans* people.

Deuteronomy 23:1 says, “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Almighty.”

Both these ritual laws appear alongside other applications of a Holiness Code that are no longer followed by even the most religious. The spiritual goals of the Holiness Code were *separation* (“holy” means “set apart”) as well as *wholeness*, manifest in *personal integrity* and *social harmony*.

At MCC North London we believe that the latter goal of wholeness may be achieved by trans* persons seeking *gender integrity* and that *social harmony* can be achieved by a community that supports and protects their rights and dignity.

“No Longer Male and Female”

“There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28)

The writer of this passage, the apostle Paul – himself a Jewish Christian free male – neither denies nor diminishes various identities, but affirms here that unity in spiritual community trumps cultural, ethnic, economic, and gender divisions – for all are one.

Those in our own time who do not fit absolutely into the categories of male and female remind us to practice what they proclaim: that our spiritual unity with one another and with God

transcends matters of gender identity and expression.

Those who know themselves as trans* reveal that there is a spectrum that stretches between the experiences of male and female.

Both the Old and New Testaments recognise this in the positive references to “eunuchs” which may be said to resemble this experience. More explicitly, the Mishnah and Talmud (the earliest Jewish law and folklore) have terms for differently gendered individuals between male and female.

“Male and Female...One Flesh”

An ancient Jewish text, the Bereshit Rabbah, provides valuable commentary on the second creation story (Genesis 2). It suggests that the first human creature (“Adam” means “human”) was androgynous, and the reference to taking a rib is more accurately understood as taking a side of this first human to create the second human. Thus male and female come from one flesh. Remembering that “male and female” are complementary features in the “image of God” may help us accept gender as a spectrum of experience as well as complementary features in any individual human being.

Male and female “become one flesh” again in Genesis 2:24, when blended into the single unit we call marriage. This suggests that, *just as binary distinctions between male and female are transcended in spiritual community, so they are transcended by the spiritual union of marriage.* Thus, marriage is not dependent on gender.

Furthermore, when Jesus was asked about marriage in the resurrection, He says, “Those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage ...because they are like angels and are children of God.” (Luke 20:35-36) *Thus, in spiritual union*

with God, distinctions of male and female are also overcome.

“Be Fruitful and Multiply”

Sometimes opposition to trans* people comes from God’s mandate, also in Genesis, “to be fruitful and multiply” – procreation. Sex reassignment surgery (not always a part of transitioning) may disable procreation in the sense of bearing children, but not in other ways of creating family. At the same time, the Bible contains *positive references to eunuchs*, who were castrated and unable to procreate, and thus considered unacceptable spiritually.

Through the prophet Isaiah, *God defends eunuchs* and welcomes all such outcasts to the temple: “*For thus says the Almighty, ‘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’*” (Isaiah 56:4-5). Jesus quotes this same chapter of Isaiah when he clears the temple, saying “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:7, Mark 11:17).

Jesus also defends eunuchs in his teaching on marriage, clarifying it doesn’t apply to everyone: “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 realm of heaven” (Matthew 19:12). And in the eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, the account of the early church, *Philip baptises an Ethiopian eunuch* who is reading Isaiah.

All these references portend a welcome to those who could not procreate and whose bodies were

surgically altered in a way that would exclude them from the temple at Jerusalem.

“God Looks on the Heart”

Consider when God charged the prophet Samuel to find a new king. All the sons of Jesse were brought forward, and all appeared to Samuel more like a king than the small, ruddy youngster named David. But God declares to Samuel, “*The Almighty does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Almighty looks on the heart*” (1Samuel 16:7). *The sex of a person may be culturally determined by externals, but gender is a matter of the heart.*

What allowed the early church to become more inclusive was witnessing the Spirit at work in the lives not only of circumcised Jews, but also of uncircumcised Gentiles.

In Acts 10 and 11, Peter, one of the first disciples, explains to the first church council that he could not refuse the welcome of baptism to those that God had given “the same gift that God gave us when we believed” (Acts 11:14). For MCC North London this serves as a model for the inclusion of trans* people.

In the view of many Jews and Christians alike, *what mattered to God was not the externals such as circumcision, but rather, “real circumcision is a matter of the heart”* (Romans 2:29, and a concept also in Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; 9:29; Acts 7:51).

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Adapted from:

‘Gender Identity and the Bible: Jewish & Christian Perspectives by Rev. Chris Glaser, M.Div.

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July 2015

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