

## PANEL ON DOCTRINE REPORT ON TRANSGENDER

### GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2018

*'The General Assembly ask the Panel on Doctrine to produce guidance for Kirk Sessions and Members on the Biblical position relating to issues of gender identity'.*

The Panel on Doctrine has been asked to produce guidance for Kirk Sessions and Members and although inevitably there will be a desire to look immediately for pastoral and practical guidance, it is important to gain an understanding of the issue from both a theological and cultural context. The Report will therefore touch on some important matters of definition; look briefly at the theology of our humanity as it impinges on this area; seek to set this within our society as it is now taking shape; and only then to attempt to give pastoral guidance. The Report concludes by flagging up both current and impending wider implications.

### INTRODUCTION & DEFINITION

Transgender or gender identity is an issue that seems to have sprung from almost nowhere in the last few years and with little sense of any consideration for the implications in wider society.<sup>1</sup> Many find themselves confused by a plethora of initials that seem to expand by the day. Having just become accustomed to LGB (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual) we forged out into LGBTQQIA – and so on, to the point that at the time of writing, Facebook, for example, amongst social media has 71 different options for gender. However we need to be clear on a number of points.

- a. Social Media confuses what we must not. There is a difference between sexuality, or sexual orientation and gender. LGB sexual orientation has to do with sexual preferences; Transgender with the quality of being male or female or neutral or other. These two matters should not be conflated. The United Free Church position on sexuality is clearly expressed in Panel on Doctrine Reports to the General Assembly on both homosexuality (1995) and on Civil Partnerships (2005). This report will not be dealing with sexuality.
- b. There is an extremely rare condition (around 0.05% <sup>2</sup>) called intersex, or hermaphroditism which is a genetic condition. Males generally have an X & Y chromosome; females X and X. Intersex is generally caused by possessing additional X and/or Y chromosomes. This is a medical condition which we will not be dealing with.
- c. Transvestism, where a person dresses in the clothes of the opposite sex is likewise not dealt with here, because generally there is no clear sense that they are in the wrong gender body.
- d. Transgender is where a person (male or female) believes that they are in the wrong body and should be (respectively) female or male.
- e. Although we will be using the term 'Transgender' this should not prevent us seeing that behind the term are unique, individual human beings and that each particular presentation of transgenderism will be likewise unique. If we are to be helpful to the Church we do, however, have to lay out certain broad principles.
- f. Until relatively recently, transgenderism was called *gender dysphoria*. The term dysphoria itself recognises the lack of well-being and indeed the pain that the person

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<sup>1</sup> As the preacher in Ecclesiastes points out, there is nothing new under the sun and transgender, or gender dysphoria is likewise not a new phenomenon; however its prominence and cultural rather than medical pressures to conform to a particular way of regarding it have taken a very striking form in recent years.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.isna.org/faq/frequency>

will be feeling. This should not be minimised in dealing with those with gender dysphoric feelings – i.e. that they believe that they are in the wrong body.

## A BRIEF THEOLOGY OF OUR HUMANITY

At the heart of this issue is the profound question of who we are. Scripture must be the starting point to the answer in who God says we are, which itself lies at the very opening of the Bible in Genesis chapters 1 – 3.

First that we are made in the image of God in all that that means. Spiritual; creative; having dominion over the earth under God as just a few of the areas. But we are created in the image of God in a very particular way:

*“Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”*

*<sup>27</sup> So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”*

*<sup>27</sup> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”<sup>3</sup>*

Mankind; our humanity – is created specifically in two genders, male and female. This view of humanity’s creation is restated in something of a résumé in Genesis 5:1, 2: *“When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. <sup>2</sup> He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them “Mankind” when they were created.” <sup>4</sup>*

It is then again reaffirmed, almost in passing and so the more potently, by Jesus in Matthew 19:4 (parallel with Mark 10:6): *“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’.* Jesus is simply confirming the Genesis account of how we are created by God.

In one sense there is little else to say from the biblical text, but that is because there is little more one can say. We are created in the image of God; and we are created binary – that is, there are only two genders. Male and female are created, as it were, face-to-face as equals and as companions. Male and female together are presented as sufficient for God’s purposes in our relationship to one another and to Him. We are created purposely as either male *or* female and therefore there is neither fluidity between genders, nor to other possibilities.

To press this a little further we need to set the biblical account of our humanity against the scientific understanding; the cultural background to human identity; and the biblical view of our humanity as fallen.

**Scientifically**, although we are accustomed to viewing gender characteristics as stemming from the XX or XY chromosomal pairings, recent research<sup>5</sup> from the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel, has found that at least 6,500 genes are expressed at different levels in male or female body tissues. That is to say, this gender specification runs right through the human body from conception and beyond.

Likewise when a person undergoes treatment to change gender, then that person will require to take the appropriate hormone treatment for the rest of their life. One could say that the body is constantly seeking to return to its native gender, and that natural drive must constantly be suppressed in order to remain the “other” gender.

If the body requires constant medical intervention then it suggests that the dysphoria arises not from a physical issue, but a psychological one, which is precisely how it was

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<sup>3</sup> Gen 1:26–27 All references *The New International Version* (2011). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan

<sup>4</sup> Gen 5:1–2

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.bionews.org.uk/page\\_839117.asp](http://www.bionews.org.uk/page_839117.asp)

viewed until very recently. Psychiatrist Karl Benzio has posited that “*Transgender occurs when a person with a psychospiritual issue is looking for a physical solution.*”<sup>6</sup>

The main point, however, that we would wish to make here is simply to point out the way in which a scientific/ biological understanding of the human body reflects exactly the biblical understanding.

**Culturally** a Christian understanding of our humanity is running counter to that of our present culture. We will deal with this a little more in the next section, but we need to see the two main and converging elements. First is the *psychologising* of our culture – that is, that what we *feel* has become the touchstone of all truth. Secondly that human identity is wrapped round *sexuality* in a powerful and almost all-consuming way.

This is perhaps one of the primary failings the church made in its understanding of the debate on sexuality, which was viewed by the church as a moral issue, but by the proponents of same-sex relationships as an issue of identity and therefore fundamental and foundational. When we questioned the matter as one of actions being sinful or not, it was perceived as an attack on who the person *felt* they really were. The psychological had priority in identity.

A biblical understanding of our humanity comes from reflecting on our relationship to the holy and loving God who made us in His image and will, through Jesus Christ, recreate us in the image of His Son. For the Christian then, our identity is found in Jesus Christ<sup>7</sup> so that, even as we continue to wrestle with the remnants of the old nature, our redemption in Jesus Christ nevertheless points us to the new humanity that is even now ours, through the new birth. And even as we struggle daily with sin and the effects of the fall, that new humanity assures us of the hope of the fullness of redemption in a sinless resurrected body that will beautifully reflect the risen Lord.<sup>8</sup>

**The Fall.** Issues such as transgender present themselves before us from time to time, and they become for a while the only thing that we seem to focus on, but transgender like all matters of gender and sexuality arise because we are all fallen creatures. Sin distorts and impacts every one of us at every level – physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual. We “*all sin and fall short of the glory of God.*”<sup>9</sup> We live no less in this era as any other as those, and amongst those who exchange the truth of God for a lie.<sup>10</sup> In doing so we not only hurt others, but hurt ourselves.

Just because, to those not struggling with this, the issue at hand seems so utterly different does not make non-Christians struggling with transgender any more beyond the reach of God’s grace than, for example, outwardly conventional people who reject Jesus Christ. Nor does it place Christians struggling with transgender beyond the compassion of Christ and His people. If there is one crucial element of our humanity we need to hold to it is that, if we are Christians, we are what we are by the grace of God.

It is interesting that at the opening of Genesis, when Adam and Eve disobey God and eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the first thing that we read of them is that: “*they realised that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.*”<sup>11</sup> That is they became self-aware of, and ashamed of, their own bodies.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cmda.org/resources/publication/tcd-winter-2015-gender-m-or-f-or-other>

<sup>7</sup> for example 2 Corinthians 5:17: *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!* Galatians 2:20: *I no longer live but Christ lives in me;* and many other places

<sup>8</sup> 1 John 3: 1 - 3

<sup>9</sup> Romans 3: 23

<sup>10</sup> Romans 1: 25

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 3: 7

The story of the Fall also points us to one of the crucial aspects of both theology and culture, which is how do we choose the right? The story of the Fall is not primarily about Adam & Eve *knowing* good and evil, but *deciding for themselves* what constitutes right and wrong. That then is the tragedy that has followed humanity down through the years: the decision not to listen to God's words and instead to listen to something within ourselves.

We are encouraged to "*listen to your heart*" yet as we learn from God's word "*the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*"<sup>12</sup>

And from Jesus: "*He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean'. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly."*"<sup>13</sup>

If Christians have sometimes needed to learn that our spiritual lives can be fallen, perhaps our culture needs to learn that our sexual and gender lives are not immune from wrong thinking and will equally show evidences of the fall.

Part of the problem in dealing with this issue is that we can find ourselves talking past one another, not least because Christians see our identity through the lens of Christ's redemption. We know what we are as sinners; what we should be; and what we will be. Our goal is, through Jesus Christ, to reach what we will be – recreated in the image of Christ, the perfect image of God.<sup>14</sup> The psychological identity thinking of our day is a new manifestation of the sin that places self at the centre, and God as servant of our desires.

For the Christian, truth is always what God says it is, since our fallen thinking will always distort truth in some measure.

## THE CULTURE AND IDENTITY SHAPING

As was acknowledged in the introduction, the whole issue of transgenderism seems to have come from almost nowhere a couple of years ago to be now a major influence on society. This raises the question of *why now?*

The answer is that, our society has been heading in this kind of direction for some time. What is often referred to generically as post-modernism contains a number of elements with which we are increasingly familiar.

- **Relativism** This is the view that there is no such thing as absolute truth and therefore one view of the world is as valid as any other. This has particularly played out in the religious sphere with the argument that there are many ways to your own particular god, but its influence is far wider in that people feel they have the right to shape their own truth in every sphere. The conflict around 'fake news' is simply a current expression.
- **Post-Christendom** Certainly in the UK as the Judeo-Christian foundations have seeped out of the public sphere we can no longer think of Scotland or Britain as 'Christian'. These foundations formed the framework for such as law and education, but from that also a generally accepted moral code. As these foundations have been undermined it has allowed competing moralities to take their own places, and with the relativism, none is permitted to take an absolute place, although it does feel as though secularism is becoming the de facto religion of our time.
- **Radical individualism** Although this has obvious connections to the relativism above, we can actually trace this line of thinking back to the mid-1800's in the writing of John Stuart Mill, where the greatest good was for the individual to pursue their own greatest happiness as long as no one was harmed. This has led to what we might describe as radical non-judgementalism. That is, no-one can say that what anyone

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<sup>12</sup> Jeremiah 17:9

<sup>13</sup> Mark 7: 20 - 22

<sup>14</sup> Romans 8: 28 - 30

else does or pursues is wrong if they feel it pursues their own happiness. But this has inevitably also contributed to the breakdown of both family and wider society as the communal aspect of happiness is secondary to the individual. Add then into that mix the sexual revolution, where the greatest good was defined by that liberation; then we move to personal identity being tied to sexual preference; and then we arrive at the freedom to choose which gender is desired.

There are a number of aspects to transgenderism that themselves have challenged what had been a prevailing culture, for example in feminism. The issue that many feminists have with transgenderism and the viewpoint of a man trapped in a woman's body or vice-versa, is both that it takes a narrow view of what it means to be and experience life as a woman; and also that it has reintroduced and reinforced stereotypes of male and female.<sup>15</sup> For example a girl who likes climbing trees is, in the transgender agenda, being pressed to be viewed as "really" a boy; a boy who plays quietly with a doll is "really" a girl.

The Church itself also needs to be careful about what it views as male or female roles as many of these may themselves be culturally conditioned. The wife of noble character in Proverbs 31 is an incredibly hard-working woman including engaging in land transactions and general trading – a view of a wife that would have been thought out of place in society and in many church circles say, 50 years ago. There is 'maleness' and 'femaleness' in the biblical picture, but the Church needs to be careful not merely to perpetuate a cultural rather than biblical view of what is 'gender-appropriate'.

One last aspect that perhaps needs further study is why, as preliminary research suggests, three times as many men are pursuing gender reassignment as women. Are there underlying cultural shifts that the Church needs to address, even as it acknowledges its difficulty and often failure in reaching men? Does that fact have wider implications?

## A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE AND THE PASTORAL TASK

There are always two levels in dealing with any issue that has pastoral implications. The theological understanding and response which helps to direct us in the pastoral task. The theological response needs to be as clear as possible; the pastoral task more nuanced in dealing with personal implications.

**The theological response** has a number of elements which will run counter to the culture and philosophy of the world around us, but it is important that we hold to a biblical view. Jesus in praying for His disciples in John 17 says: "*Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.*"<sup>16</sup> In a culture that seems determined to deconstruct humanity in general and gender in particular<sup>17</sup> we are to be clear that, apart from the specific and very rare exceptions of intersex, there are two and only two genders.

Therefore, likewise we need to clearly reaffirm that gender is not a social or cultural construct that we are free to shape how we will in the shifting times, but an established and

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<sup>15</sup> For example the no-platforming furore over Germaine Greer, and then long-time gay rights campaigner, Peter Tatchell over trans v feminist rights:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/25/germaine-greer-prejudice-trans-people>

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/feb/13/peter-tatchell-snubbed-students-free-speech-veteran-gay-rights-activist>

<sup>16</sup> John 17: 17

<sup>17</sup> An example of where this deconstruction of humanity and gender can end up comes from evidence submitted to a court in North Carolina by Dr. Deanna Deakins professor at Duke University School of Medicine and the director of the Duke Center for Child and Adolescent Gender Care (which opened in 2015).

Adkins argued: "It is counter to medical science to use chromosomes, hormones, internal reproductive organs, external genitalia, or secondary sex characteristics to override gender identity for purposes of classifying someone as male or female." (U.S. District Court, Middle District of North Carolina, Case 1:16-cv-00236-TDS-JEP) That would, by implication, make it impossible to say 'It's a boy' or 'It's a girl' at birth.

immovable God-created reality. As we have seen, the genetic scientific evidence confirms the biblical truth.

Equally we need to reaffirm that our identity as individuals does not depend on our sexual preferences, nor, in this sense, on our gender, because our identity is as those made in the image of God. Paul in Galatians 3:28, in the context of our identity in Christ affirms that, in Christ there is neither male nor female, but we are one in Him. Our gender is not the supreme description of who we are.

Nevertheless, God did make us male and female, and theologically, physically, genetically we are what we are. There is a wide body of medical evidence that those with gender dysphoria also have, often multiple, other psychological and emotional issues in their lives.<sup>18</sup> One example quoted in a number of articles is that anorexia is also a body dysphoric condition, but we would not encourage such a person to diet; rather we attempt to help them see the truth about who they are.

Confirming this the American Psychiatric Association's DSM V notes gender dysphoria desistence rates of 70 to 97 percent in "natal males" and 50 to 88 percent in "natal females."<sup>19</sup> That is the vast majority of gender dysphoric boys and girls accept their birth/ chromosomal sex by adolescence or adulthood.

If truth is vital, then connected vitally is that we speak the truth; and that we do so in love.

**Pastorally** then we approach this issue as we do with any pastoral matter, firstly by really listening to the person to understand how they feel and how they have arrived at where they are. We deal with this with compassion reflecting the care of Jesus: "*A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.*"<sup>20</sup>

Jesus, however, although He calls us to Him as we are, does not redeem us to leave us as we are, but to transform us. As we have said already, the fall impacts every aspect of our lives, and Jesus came in our flesh, one with us, to redeem and renew every aspect of our humanity. Our sanctification in general is a transforming of all those areas of our speaking, thinking, acting and living through the means of grace that God has given in word, prayer and sacrament, so that we grow in conformity with the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Gender dysphoric feelings are no different in this. We must speak the truth – in love.

As with every struggle, it is the duty of all, and especially the eldership to hear and support the individual; to pray with and for the person and to hold central that our value and worth as individuals are tied primarily to who we are. We are all made in the image of God and as Christians we are redeemed to be remade in the image of God. Our sin never defines us; our Redeemer does.

At this point it may be helpful to distinguish transgender or gender dysphoria, that feeling that the person is in the wrong gender body; and gender fluidity in which a person is on a shifting spectrum of gender self-descriptions (such as Facebook's 71) which may imply greater psychological confusion. Although the general pastoral approach will be the same, the particular point of ultimate pastoral need will differ.

Since our Redeemer, Jesus Christ defines who we are, so necessarily does our redemption, that is our life in Him. Our whole life of sanctification has the single purpose of increasing conformity to the mind of Christ; and so the work of the Church in preaching and pastoring has the task of helping us towards that reshaping. We are to become in ourselves what we already are in Christ. And therefore the truth of who we are, though not by any means confined to gender, does not exclude our gender.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26788901>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/dsm>

<sup>20</sup> Isaiah 42: 3

If what has been said in this Report holds good, then gender dysphoric feelings or gender fluid impulses are a disjunction between what the person feels they are, and who they really are. The pastoral task and support is to narrow that divide. Like many pastoral matters, this may be painful and lengthy since we never bear a cross and die to self easily. But that is why Jesus calls us into a body, the Church, so that we weep with those who weep; and encourage one another along the way.

All this assumes that the person does wish to live obediently to God's call, but that is again, no different from many other pastoral matters. The problem added in is that there is a huge cultural push to not simply accept transgender, but to both celebrate and promote it. What one author has called "*transgenderism*".<sup>21</sup> This is what may be called both a philosophical and quasi-religious push, that runs counter to the science, to lock young people into choices that have long-term implications, even though most will grow to accept who they are.<sup>22</sup>

It is this that undoubtedly brings concern to elders, Kirk Sessions and members of the church in handling these as pastoral issues. We will consider some of this under the section 'Wider Implications'. However this fear should not undermine or detract from approaching individuals with a pastoral heart.

## WIDER IMPLICATIONS

The concerns about transgender lie not simply with our theological understanding and the pastoral needs we may come across. At the moment, the chances of personally encountering transgenderism anywhere remain very small indeed, yet the impact of the current shifts in culture and the implications for the Church are enormous. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the realm of education and children's work more generally.

The recent moves towards gender neutral language; self-identification of gender (which has already led some youth organisations as the Girl Guides to say that a boy can be in a girls' camp if he self-identifies as a girl<sup>23</sup>); and ease of hormone treatment even to pre-pubescent children are all of deep concern. At heart is the view that truth is what we make it, rather than an objective reality.

All of these moves are deeply worrying and potentially deeply destructive both of individuals and of the wider social structures. Indeed in December 2017 Dr. Michelle Cretella, President of the American College of Paediatricians spoke of hormone treatment for pre-pubescent children as "psychological abuse". She is worth quoting further: "To indoctrinate all children from preschool forward with the lie that they could be trapped in the wrong body disrupts the very foundation of a child's reality testing". Cretella added that doctors are encouraging children to 'transition' by offering puberty blockers, which can have dangerous consequences. "When supported in their biological sex through natural puberty, the vast majority of gender-confused children get better. Yet, we chemically castrate gender-confused children with puberty blockers."<sup>24</sup>

It also runs contrary to the way that children of a young age are dealt with in any other sphere of their establishing who they are. But as has been pointed out above, all this is occurring with scant scientific backup; little understanding of the impact on society more

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<sup>21</sup> When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment by Ryan T Anderson see also <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/02/20971/>

<sup>22</sup> See above footnote 19

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/making-guiding-happen/running-your-unit/including-all/lgbt-members/supporting-trans-members/> This has raised opposition amongst some Guide Leaders: [www.thetimes.co.uk/article/gender-swap-boys-spark-guides-revolt-wtcv7xjk5](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/gender-swap-boys-spark-guides-revolt-wtcv7xjk5)

<sup>24</sup> <http://dailysignal.com/2017/12/11/cretella-transcript/>

widely; and in one case a denial of the opportunity to research those who transgendered who wanted to shift back to their original gender and the implications of it.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond simply the matter of transgender, we need to see that there is a wider and deeper struggle about ultimate reality. In one sense there is nothing new under the sun. Professor of New Testament & Early Christianity at St. Andrews University, Rev N T Wright, as others, has spoken of it as a new Gnosticism, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century heresy. In a letter to the Times of 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2017, he writes: "*The confusion about gender identity is a modern, and now internet-fuelled, form of the ancient philosophy of Gnosticism. The Gnostic, one who "knows," has discovered the secret of "who I really am," behind the deceptive outward appearance . . . This involves denying the goodness, or even the ultimate reality, of the natural world. Nature, however, tends to strike back, with the likely victims in this case being vulnerable and impressionable youngsters who, as confused adults, will pay the price for their elders' fashionable fantasies.*"<sup>26</sup>

The Church needs to be biblically well-rooted and grounded to face the challenges that will undoubtedly come, particularly in our view of what it means to be a human being; and made in the image of God.

In the name of the Panel

IAN F. R. LLOYD	Convener
JOHN O. FULTON	Secretary

#### **PROPOSED DELIVERANCE OF GENRAL ASSEMBLY**

1. The General Assembly accept the report of the Panel on Doctrine as the considered position of the United Free Church of Scotland on issues of gender identity.

#### Recommended Reading

*Transgender*          *Vaughan Roberts*          *Good Book Company Talking Points Series*

A good, basic introduction to the subject

*God and the Transgender Debate*    *Andrew T Walker*          *Good Book Company*

Explores the background in more depth, though still very readable. Also highlights particular pastoral issues.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/bath-spa-university-bars-research-into-transgender-surgery-regrets-ddxxlbfzh>

<sup>26</sup> Letters to the Times <https://www.thetimes.co.uk>