

TGC

HARD QUESTIONS



# Does God Care about Gender Identity?

Samuel D. Ferguson

“This small book is big on wisdom. Yes, God does care about gender identity, and Sam Ferguson explains why. More importantly, he helps readers go deep in understanding why the God who created us wants us to flourish as the creatures we are, and he equips readers to accompany those who struggle with this life-giving truth.”

**Ryan T. Anderson**, President, Ethics and Public Policy Center; author, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment*

“Loaded with practical advice, this book is a must-read for those who struggle with gender identity—and for their parents, youth leaders, and pastors. Ferguson’s academic work, pastoral experiences, and clear thinking uniquely position him to bring clarity and compassion to a movement that is often muddled and full of pain. If you’re trying to understand the transgender phenomenon and think about it biblically, this book’s for you.”

**Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra**, Senior Writer, The Gospel Coalition; editor, *Social Sanity in an Insta World*

“In this book, Sam Ferguson engages basic questions facing many today. Is our identity as male and female fundamentally oppressive or creative? Should we change the body to heal the mind? What’s the answer to current hurts and pains? How does transitioning compare with the Bible’s promise of transformation? Whose voices are informing and shaping minds today on these issues? Ferguson addresses these questions and more with compassion, clarity, humility, respect, and helpful guidance.”

**Mark Dever**, Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church,  
Washington, DC

“Sam Ferguson’s *Does God Care about Gender Identity?* exhibits a rare combination of pastoral wisdom, intellectual brilliance, and compassionate engagement of the culture. Highly recommended!”

**Andreas Köstenberger**, Founder, Biblical Foundations;  
Theologian in Residence, Fellowship Raleigh; author,  
*God, Marriage, and Family*

“In an era of gender and sexual confusion, Sam Ferguson has written a refreshing examination of the Bible’s perspective, providing clear and articulate understanding for the Christ follower.”

**Foley Beach**, Archbishop, Anglican Church in North  
America

*Does God Care about Gender Identity?*

## TGC Hard Questions

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# Does God Care about Gender Identity?

Samuel D. Ferguson

 **CROSSWAY®**

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*Does God Care about Gender Identity?*

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“IT’S JUST BEEN SO HARD,” Marie said quietly through tears. The mother of four was updating me about her eldest child’s gender transition. There’s no question how much Marie loves her child. Through each phase of the transition, Marie’s done her utmost to remain informed, loving, and in close communication. But watching her eighteen-year-old start hormone treatments, then two years later undergo a double mastectomy, and now, at age twenty-three, struggle to manage a newly chosen identity that requires a regimen of monthly treatments, has been hard to the point of heartbreaking.

Marie and her husband first asked me to meet with them when their high school child, Skylarr,<sup>1</sup> announced that though biologically female, she was actually a boy. I was in the middle of doctoral work in the field of theological anthropology, studying what the Bible says about being human. My particular focus touched on areas of human embodiment and identity. I’m also a pastor with some experience walking with friends who

experienced *gender dysphoria*—the technical term for severe and persistent discomfort between one’s biological sex and one’s psychological sense of gender.<sup>2</sup> Skylarr and I met at the family’s house monthly for about a year. Skylarr was binding her chest and exploring masculine dress at the time. We talked a lot about what, in 2017, newscaster Katie Couric and *National Geographic* deemed the “Gender Revolution.”<sup>3</sup>

That year, young people posed on the cover of the magazine, each one representing an emerging gender identity, including nonbinary, trans-female, androgynous, trans-male, straight female, and bigender. The cover made clear that the gender revolution was about more than a biological male being able to be a woman, or a biological female becoming a man. It marked the collapsing of a two-sexed world, the triumph of psychology over biology.

Up until the 1960s, the term *gender* was used interchangeably with *sex* to refer to the biological reality that humans are born as either male or female. These two *biological sexes* were distinguishable by their chromosomes, reproductive structures, hormone levels, and anatomical features.<sup>4</sup> Many modern thinkers—

including feminist psychologist Hilary Lips—still acknowledge the reality of two sexes, male and female.<sup>5</sup> But in recent decades, *gender* has come to mean something different from biological sex. The term as now used refers exclusively to “the psychological, social and cultural aspects of being male or female.”<sup>6</sup> As such, peoples’ *gender identity*—their self-understanding of their gender—may or may not be related to their biology. This is the revolutionary idea of the gender revolution. And with the riverbanks of biology removed, *gender identity* is now as free-flowing and expansive as one’s feelings.

A recent list of gender identities includes *gender expansive* (for those who identify in a range of ways outside the male/female binary) and *gender-fluid* (for those who experience their gender identity as shifting to some extent).<sup>7</sup> The gender revolution is still developing, and opinions about terminology vary. But one thing is clear. The movement is sweeping, affecting areas from media to medicine, from entertainment to education, from literature to legislation. It has even affected my pastoral ministry.

A confessing Christian, Skylarr was open to exploring the biblical perspective on gender. Together we looked at

the opening chapters of the Bible and talked about how, early in the biblical storyline, the reality of sexual difference, male and female, comes up. In the first chapter, we read,

God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.  
(Gen. 1:27)

It's striking, we observed, that in a book given as part of Israel's founding, there wasn't a hint about ethnicity or nationality in the account of human beginnings. Rather, it's sexual difference that Genesis reveals as essential to humanness. Gender is at the core of who we are.

But how does the Bible understand gender? After all, the term doesn't appear in Genesis 1, nor elsewhere in Scripture. Does God's word allow for the modern divorce of biological sex and gender identity? Skylarr was convinced it does. It's possible, Skylarr thought, that a man can be born—trapped, in a sense—in a female body. “God made me a man,” Skylarr told me. “But for some

reason I was born in a female body, and God's call on my life is to become the man he made me to be.”

Skylarr described herself as *trans\**, a term that refers to someone whose gender identity doesn't align with that person's biological sex. The asterisk, as one writer explains, “is a way to refer to a variety of identities that are incredibly diverse”<sup>8</sup>—the spectrum of identities encompassed under the *T* in *LGBT+*. I, on the other hand, was *cisgender*, someone for whom “gender identity and birth sex are in alignment.”<sup>9</sup> Throughout this book, I use terms like *biological sex*, *gender identity*, and *trans\** with contemporary usage in mind, but I'll probe how current definitions and understandings do or do not square with biblical teaching.

After studying the Bible with Skylarr, I'd often stay for dinner. Skylarr's parents have doctoral degrees from top-tier schools and experience in the field of education. They've poured themselves into the formation of their kids. But like many parents, they felt ill-equipped to respond to their child's gender dysphoria. Worried sick for their child's well-being and longing to be supportive, they felt torn between showing a hurting adolescent compassion and offering wise leadership. The questions they asked and

those that arose in my conversations with Skylarr speak for many of us left reeling by today's transgender movement.

Is it possible for a boy's mind to be trapped in a girl's body? Is there any evidence, biblically or scientifically, that gender is a purely psychological and social reality, divorced from biology? Did God design and assign our gender? Are our bodies or our minds the true guides and anchors for knowing who we are? What should we make of the novel and often irreversible practices of transitioning? What if Skylarr's feelings about her double mastectomy change in ten years?

### **Why This Booklet?**

This booklet is written for those interested in or concerned by today's evolving views on sex and gender. It's grown out of occasions I've had as a pastor to walk with individuals who experience gender dysphoria and their families. Whether you're a Christian, a parent, or just someone curious about gender, identity, and our shared longings for transformation, I've written this book for you. I hope you'll find here compassion, clarity, and some guidance around this complex and sensitive topic.

Throughout this booklet, I will focus on two general themes: *deeper understanding* and *compassionate engagement*.

### *Deeper Understanding*

C. S. Lewis once cautioned that a new idea “is still on trial.” Before it’s embraced, “it has to be tested against the great body of Christian thought down the ages, and all its hidden implications . . . have to be brought to light.”<sup>10</sup> Certainly this holds true for the ideas that make possible the statement “It’s a boy mind in a girl body.”<sup>11</sup> For most of human history that sentence would have been unintelligible. It assumes that gender is unrelated to biology and that people can be divided into parts. These ideas have far-reaching and, when implemented, often irreversible implications.

We must be sure we understand today’s transgender movement—its practices and core beliefs—and we must compare the transgender movement’s ideas with how the Bible understands human beings as male or female. Similarities and differences will emerge that help us to answer three core questions: (1) Is *the body* integral or incidental to gender identity? (2) What is the



*transformative path* out of dysphoria and toward wholeness? (3) Does *God* assign our biological sex and gender—that is, whether we are male or female and called to live as men or women? If so, how can we tell, and how does this affect the way we live out our maleness and femaleness?

### *Compassionate Engagement*

In addition to seeking to understand the underlying beliefs of the transgender movement, we'll ask what biblical compassion and leadership look like when caring for someone who has come out as trans\*. How should parents care for a child in duress? Can a Christian support a gender transition?

Christians should also recognize that the transgender movement provides opportunities for discipleship. What ideas about human freedom, identity, and happiness does this movement teach? Are these good for young people? Why has mental health plummeted among Generation Z as liberty for self-expression has skyrocketed? Could the rise in cases of adolescent gender dysphoria—up 1000 percent in the United States and 4000 percent in the United Kingdom<sup>12</sup>—owe more to social media saturation or social contagion than it

does to clinical gender dysphoria? These questions relate directly to Christian growth and transformation.

Moreover, we're talking not merely about a controversial topic but about real people who are hurting and often feel misunderstood, so any engagement must be marked by compassion. As I write, I have friends in mind who have suffered greatly with gender dysphoria. I'll make a case here that many of the transgender movement's ideas and practices are unsafe, and many of its hopes ultimately false. My goal, however, is not to be callous or offensive but to set all our broken lives within the contours of Scripture's vision for humanity.

### **Three Core Beliefs of the Transgender Movement**

The transgender revolution is sweeping. Deeper understanding of it requires us to consider three core beliefs that underly it and make it possible. Though often unarticulated, these beliefs are like the framing of a house, giving the transgender movement its present shape and stability.

#### *Belief 1. My Identity Is Self-Determined*

We can't understand the transgender movement if we don't grasp how it relates to our culture's obsession over

the question *Who am I?* Traditionally, our identity was something we received, and it was therefore relatively stable. Who we are was understood as determined by family of origin, nationality, biological sex, religion, and perhaps occupation. These matters were largely “givens,” arising not from feelings or decisions but from realities outside a person’s control.

Things have changed. Today, identity is a do-it-yourself project based on self-discovery and self-expression.<sup>13</sup> This gives personal feelings and decisions pride of place, and it resists external constraint. “[Here is] a view of personhood,” Carl Trueman explains, “that has almost completely dispensed with the idea of any authority beyond that of personal, psychological conviction, an oddly Cartesian notion: I think I’m a woman, therefore I am a woman.”<sup>14</sup>

*Belief 2. My Feelings, Not My Body,  
Determine My Gender*

When I was in graduate school, a classmate named Taylor shared with me about his experience of gender dysphoria. Taylor was a biological male but, since early childhood, felt like a girl. Taylor was on a hormone treatment, experimenting with cross-dressing, and hoped to undergo

transition surgery. One day Taylor asked me, “Do you feel like a man?” I answered, “Yes.” Taylor fired back: “What does that mean? And don’t tell me it means you like girls and sports. What does it mean to *feel* like a man?”

For years, that exchange troubled me. How do you describe the feeling of being a man—or a woman—and do so without reaching for cultural stereotypes about gender? In a culture obsessed with gender identity, I was shocked at how hard it was simply to describe what being a man feels like.

Finally, it dawned on me. Taylor’s question contained a significant assumption. Taylor didn’t ask me if I *was* a man. He asked me if I *felt* like a man. Subtle but seismic, this shift in verbiage reflects a core belief of the transgender movement: your feelings, not your biology, determine your identity. It’s a mind-over-matter view of people, and we may be tempted to think there’s nothing wrong with this way of thinking. But try applying this logic to age or race. What if a sixteen-year-old trying to buy a six-pack of beer blurts out to the vigilant clerk, “But I feel twenty-one”? What if a fifty-year-old man pursuing a sixteen-year-old girl says to her father, “But I feel sixteen”? What if a White male applying for a scholarship designated for

African Americans responds to the university examiner, “But I feel Black”?

Our society agrees—at least for now—that age and ethnic identity are determined by cold, hard facts, not feelings. You may have feelings *about* your age or ethnicity, but those feelings don’t determine your age or ethnic background. Why the difference in the case of gender?

Sadly, the shift toward feeling-based identity has affected the way we care for people with mental health struggles. Skylarr told me, “My therapist is on my side.” Her therapist practiced *affirmative therapy*, confirming Skylarr’s psychological sense of gender and encouraging Skylarr to find ways to explore and express it.

Historically, therapists practiced *watchful waiting*, seeking to patiently understand the feelings of those who suffer from gender dysphoria while helping them become more comfortable with their biological sex. Studies indicate that most kids—roughly 70 percent—who experience childhood gender dysphoria and are not socially transitioned outgrow it.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, clinicians are under pressure to be gender affirming.<sup>16</sup> What does this mean for patient care? This question

leads us to the third core belief of the transgender movement.

*Belief 3. We Find Wholeness through  
External, Not Internal, Change*

People have long recognized their need for inner healing and change. Humans suffer from bad thinking, broken hearts, and any number of internal psychological disorders. But the transgender revolution's path toward healing and wholeness assumes that the deep change a person with gender dysphoria needs must happen mainly on the outside. Those who suffer are told they need to change their external appearance, not their perspective.

Increasingly, gender dysphoria is treated not through counseling but through *transitioning*, a process that involves puberty blockers, hormone treatments, and surgeries. There's debate within the medical community as to the age and speed at which to start a young person on this treatment pathway. Some see a quick transition as inappropriate and unsafe, but Dr. Colt St. Amand of the Mayo Clinic suggests that a long assessment period before transitioning "reeks of some old kind of conversion-therapy." The doctor goes on:

I am less concerned with certainty around identity, and more concerned with hearing the person's embodiment goals. Do you want to have a deep voice? Do you want to have breasts? You know, what do you want for your body?<sup>17</sup>

Even when there's debate about the timing and pace of treatment, doctors are increasingly agreed on this trajectory: *change the body to heal the mind*.

### Some Concerns about Transitioning

Even if one were to grant that feelings determine gender, three major concerns arise about affirmative therapy's push for hormone and surgical transitioning.

*First, affirmative therapy moves too quickly with immature kids who are easily manipulated by social pressure.* Historically, gender dysphoria affected predominately males in early childhood, with a ratio as high as five boys to one girl<sup>18</sup>—and the majority outgrew it.<sup>19</sup> Today, roughly two-thirds of cases affect biological females, with symptoms arising suddenly during the turbulent years of adolescence.<sup>20</sup> Such changes in prevalence suggest social pressures are at play. Moreover, studies indicate that

socially transitioning a child dramatically increases the likelihood gender dysphoria will persist.<sup>21</sup> How can we justify encouraging children during years of complex development to make permanent changes based on what may be a passing phase?

*Second, the methods of transitioning are inherently traumatic to our natural bodies.* One can't help but see a disconnect between our culture's growing concern for nature—care for the environment and our embrace of organic foods that aren't genetically modified—and the transgender movements treatment of our natural bodies. One theologian put it poignantly in a letter to the [London] *Times's* editors:

[Gender transitioning] 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>22</sup>

As the number of gender clinics skyrockets in the US—from one in 2007 to more than a hundred in



2022<sup>23</sup>—several European nations have tightened restrictions for youth seeking to transition.<sup>24</sup> “The risks of hormonal interventions for gender dysphoric youth outweigh the potential benefits,” said Sweden’s National Board of Health and Welfare.<sup>25</sup>

*Finally, when affirmative therapy is judged by its own stated goals, transitioning hasn’t proved effective.* It’s not yet known whether the short-term relief from dysphoria teenagers can feel after transitioning will persist in adulthood.<sup>26</sup> Neither is it clear how teens will feel in the long run about irreversible changes made to their bodies. Grace Lidinsky-Smith’s story in *Newsweek* is sobering: “One year [after transitioning], I would be curled in my bed, clutching my double-mastectomy scars and sobbing with regret.”<sup>27</sup> Skylarr’s mother shared with me post-transition, “Skylarr still knows she’ll never really be a man, but she’s resigned to life presenting as one.” Transitioning appears to be a high-risk and often low-reward gamble.<sup>28</sup>

These are the core beliefs of today’s transgender movement and some concerns they raise. Next, we’ll turn to Scripture. How does the Bible understand identity and gender differently? How does it view our bodies? And for