

ECCA Theology Conference Postconference 2016
The Ministry of the Gospel and Gender Dysphoria
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ECCA Theology Conference

Introduction: The Ministry of the Gospel & Gender Dysphoria

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Introduction

A few years ago our Theology Conference theme was [The Theology of Human Sexuality](#). We focused on the biblical teaching of human sexuality, cultural pressures against God's ordained order, marriage and its goodness, divorce and its effects and same-sex attraction. It was an excellent conference that helped our pastors and leaders considerably. The Spiritual Heritage Committee wrote a white paper as a resource for pastors, leaders and churches: [A Church Statement on Human Sexuality: Homosexuality and Same-Sex "Marriage" – A Resource for EFCA Churches](#)

Our 2016 Theology Conference focuses on The Doctrine of the Church. In addition to understand the biblical nature and purpose of the church, it is important that we discern the cultural and contextual issues of the day in which our pastors, leaders and churches need to think through and respond from a biblical, theological and pastoral perspective. This year the focus will be on gender dysphoria. Although the numbers are small, the cultural push and implications have been huge. One of the recent figures I read was that 0.3 to 0.5 percent of the population identifies as transgender (acknowledging the challenge of compiling accurate statistics). One would certainly not know that through the media. Furthermore, those experiencing gender dysphoria or those in relationship with one experiencing gender dysphoria sense a far greater weight than that small percentage.

The culture has long moved beyond homosexuality and same-sex matters such that it is considered the norm. However, we in the church continue to think through and ponder the Scriptures, affirming its truth and authority, while we wrestle with and pray over pastoral responses. The cultural push now is the presentation and acceptance of gender dysphoria. While we in the church continue to think through the past cultural agenda, which is important, the cultural mandate of normalizing gender dysphoria presses on ahead. It is vital for us in the church to learn about gender dysphoria and to understand it through the lens of Scripture, the absolute and ultimate authority, so that we can engage in pastoral care to those affected, both directly and indirectly.

The Ministry of the Gospel and Gender Dysphoria

The title explains that what we do is rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Biblical truth and the gospel of Jesus Christ are the foundation of what we believe, the absolute and ultimate truth, what we affirm as *sola Scriptura*. This is also foundational for how we live, for God's truth we affirm is also the means by which we grow in holiness and are conformed into the likeness of the Son. It is the only means through which we will truly flourish. From this foundation, we will

focus on ministry among those who identify as, struggle or suffer with or are affected by gender dysphoria. This also includes those who know or love someone who so identifies. Although our title addresses gender dysphoria, the phenomenon, our focus will be on the person who experiences gender dysphoria, which emphasizes the role of pastoral care and shepherding.

In the three sessions, we will focus on the following:

- Session 1 – Gender Dysphoria: Foundational Considerations (Key Terms and Biblical Perspectives)
- Session 2 – Gender Dysphoria: Scientific—Biological, Psychological, and Sociocultural Considerations
- Session 3 – Gender Dysphoria: Toward a Pastoral Response

Biblical Truth and Application

There are not many Evangelicals who are providing insight into gender dysphoria, much less are those who are actively seeking to provide pastoral care to those who experience gender dysphoria and their families affected by it. Mark Yarhouse is one of those few individuals.

Yarhouse affirms the inerrancy and authority of the Bible. He acknowledges the Scriptures as the absolute and ultimate authority. Furthermore, he is theologically anchored. His concern is to affirm the truthfulness of Scripture and apply those truths in a fallen world in which we provide care to people who experience gender dysphoria. He senses a call to minister directly to those suffering from gender dysphoria and families and others affected by it. This is why he has been asked to address this topic, as there really is no other Evangelical who speaks in such an informed manner on the subject.

Some of the disagreement regarding how to understand and respond to gender dysphoria among Evangelicals, who equally affirm the inerrancy and authority of the Bible, rests in the implication or application, i.e. how we respond pastorally. That is not an insignificant matter, but it does, I think, explain some of the differences. While affirming the biblical truth and foundation, we as fellow Evangelicals ought to extend grace among each other as we stumble toward maturity in our application and pastoral care.

It might be helpful to consider a taxonomy of articulating and defending the biblical truth in relation to gender dysphoria as discussed and applied in different contexts. Consider four audiences, the first three within the church, the last one more culturally outside the church, at least the Evangelical church, with different goals in each of the audiences:

- to instruct morally and to strengthen ethical resolve;
- to instruct for the purpose of pastoral response and engagement;
- to engage pastorally with individuals, that person in need, and families who are affected;
- to respond to the gender activists, sometimes within the liberal church, and often those outside the church.

Although all Evangelicals affirm the absolute authority of the Bible and are aware of these various audiences and different purposes with each of them, there are differences in approach for each of these audiences. As a general rule, there will be agreement among Evangelicals on key, foundational biblical and theological truths, while there will be differences of emphases and applications. It is important for us to hear from those who are addressing this issue with

different emphases. For example, responding to activists and responding to the person who claims gender dysphoria and the family who lives with this are two different matters and require the same truth applied in different ways. Although this is known, often the debate among Evangelicals about biblical authority and gender dysphoria reflects there is a one-size-fits-all approach in implication and application, so it is claimed that those who differ undermine biblical authority. That may be the case, but not necessarily so.

We affirm the authority of the Bible and seek to apply biblical truth to the issues of human sexuality and gender dysphoria. Only a few at the moment are engaged in ministry on the front-lines with those who struggle with some aspect of human sexuality, particularly gender dysphoria. Yarhouse is one of those. That does not affect his commitment to biblical truth, but it does his implications and applications. We will hear a distinct voice because of this emphasis in his ministry. We may or may not agree with how he approaches this, but we will learn.

An Example

Although you may not personally know someone who experiences gender dysphoria, or even someone who knows one who identifies with gender dysphoria, it is likely there is someone in the church where you serve who does. I asked someone in the latter category about this. This person wrote from the perspective of a family member who is living with another family member experiencing gender dysphoria. How do they think, ponder and respond to this loved one? In the midst of this, they look to the church for love and support, but yet are afraid because of what it may communicate.

What, then, are the questions the church and leadership ought to be asking? What teaching should they be doing? Here is what my friend noted:

- Understand that this family is dealing with a serious mental health issue and suicide risk (41% commit suicide). This condition (regretfully) cannot be treated with medication.
- Educate yourselves and your congregation to accept and love this family, not make them feel outcast.
- From experience, the discussions *always* shift from Transgender to Gay discussions. These two are not the same. Please don't draw us into the Gay discussion.
- The family feels embarrassed and fearful of ridicule and shame. Be compassionate and genuine.
- Please don't draw us into a discussion on who sinned, the parent or the child. This is a result of the fall, don't shift this to who is to blame (we already grieve enough).
- Families have to adjust to the recalibration. Moving through name changes (including legal name changes), gender pronoun changes, changing appearances etc. Even though we do not sanction what is done, we have no control over what our adult children do. But even though we grieve with and for them, they are still our child and we love them. We are always mindful that a suicide risk still exists.

Biblical Affirmations and Implications: Human Sexuality and Gender Dysphoria

As we consider and discuss gender dysphoria, it is important to establish some biblical affirmations along with some implications. We will learn much more from Yarhouse, but this lays some essential groundwork. These statements have been adapted from A Church Statement on Human Sexuality.

Biblical Affirmations

- God created human beings as male and female (Gen. 1:27). The complementary, relational nature of the human race as “male and female” reflects the created order given by God when He created human beings “in His image” (Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1, 3; 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; Jms. 3:9; cf. Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:23-24; Col. 3:10). It is with joy in our finitude that we are to receive the gift of being either male or female
- All of human existence, including our sexuality, has been deeply damaged by the fall into sin (Gen. 3; Rom. 3:23; 5:12). We all are sinners, broken in some measure by this fall. Though Christians are rescued, reconciled, renewed and in process of being transformed, this brokenness also affects us in that we groan, as the whole creation, eager to experience final redemption knowing at present we live in a not-yet-glorified state (Rom. 8:22-23).
- Everything, from our environment to our bodily genetic code, has been ravaged by sin and the fall. Whether the gender dysphoria people experience is the product of their environment, their genetics, or another source, they are not what God intends and so do not render transgenderism legitimate.
- Temptation, including sexual attractions, is not sin. Sin is yielding to temptation. Jesus himself was tempted, yet without sin (Matt. 4:1-11, Heb. 4:15).
- The gospel is full of grace and truth. It is an offer of grace and forgiveness to sinners as well as a call to live a holy life. It empowers us in the struggle to resist sin, including the sin of homosexual practice (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Eph. 4:20-24; 1 Thess. 4:3-8; Tit. 2:11-13).
- The church is to be a new community that resembles a family of brothers and sisters united in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit displaying deep relationships of love (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-13; Rom. 12:10; 1 Tim. 5:1-2).

Implications

- We Christians who attempt to follow biblical mandates on God’s creation of us as male and female are not immune to expressing our own sexuality in sinful ways, for “all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory” (Rom. 3:23). We must always be mindful of this and humbly relate to others accepting that we all are fallen creatures.
- At the same time, all human beings deserve to be treated with dignity and respect because each of us bears the image of God. A transgender person deserves this dignity and respect no less than any other, and we, as Christians, should demonstrate this in our thoughts, speech, and behavior. Speech, including humor, which demeans those experiencing gender dysphoria, has no place in the Christian community. Likewise, this means we oppose any mistreatment of those who identify as a transgender person.
- We mourn with those who struggle with gender dysphoria, and with their families, but as we grieve, we encourage behavior that follows the clear divine teachings of Scripture.
- Though recognizing that due to sin and human brokenness our experience of our sex and gender is not always as God the Creator originally designed, our recognition of our sex as male or female as a gift from God dictates that we cannot support or affirm the resolution of tension between a person’s biological sex and experience of gender by the adoption of a psychological identity discordant with that person’s birth sex, nor support or affirm attempts to change via medical intervention one’s given biological birth sex in

favor of the identity of the opposite sex or of an indeterminate identity. This primarily addresses those who self-select sex and/or gender. We recognize that in rare cases some are born with both sets of sexual organs (intersex). This is another one of the implications of living in a fallen world, and another reminder that our sexuality has been deeply damaged by the fall.

- We in the Church must seek ways to minister to and support those among us who struggle with gender dysphoria, and those who have family members or others close to them who identify as a transgender person.
- We in the Church must seek ways to reach out in love to those in our society who identify as a transgender person.

Conclusion

In the EFCA we are grounded in the gospel and tethered to the text of Scripture. We are also deeply committed to living out this truth of Scripture. And we do so in a fallen-yet-redeemed-though-not-yet-glorified world. There is sin, hurt, and brokenness. And yet in the midst of this, the gospel offers hope. We engage in pastoral care not only to share God's truth with others, but because it is our only hope, our only true way of flourishing as God ordained.

As we engage in pastoral ministry of the gospel in the local church in the moral realms of human sexuality and gender dysphoria, we are an outpost of heaven. We reflect God's eschatological people who offer the hope of the gospel in a context of love produced by the gospel which reflects the now of the kingdom. And we are often reminded through our pastoral care of our groaning, which reflects the not-yetness of the kingdom, as we await final redemption.

