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Seven things I'm learning about transgender persons

OPINION MARK WINGFIELD | MAY 13, 2016

I don't know much about transgender issues, but I'm trying to learn.

How about you? How much do you really know about this subject beyond all the screaming headlines and concerns about who goes to the bathroom where?



The truth is that I don't know any transgender persons — at least I don't think I do. But with the help of a pediatrician friend and a geneticist friend, I'm listening and trying to learn. This is hard, though, because understanding the transgender experience seems so far outside what I have ever contemplated before. And the more I learn, the more theological questions I face as well. This is hard, even for a pastor.

Here's some of what I'm learning from my friends who have experience as medical professionals dealing with real people and real families:

1. Even though LGBT gets lumped together in one tagline, the T is quite different than the LG and B. "Lesbian," "gay" and "bisexual" describe sexual orientation. "Transgender" describes gender identity. These are not the same thing. Sexual orientation is about whom we feel an attraction to and want to mate with; gender identity is about whether we identify as male or female.
2. What you see is not always what you get. For the vast majority of humanity, the presence of male or female genitalia corresponds to whether a person is male or female. What you see is what you are. But for a small part of humanity (something less than 1 percent), the visible parts and the inner identity do not line up. For example, it is possible to be born with male genitalia but female chromosomes or vice versa. And now brain research has demonstrated that it also is possible to be born with female genitalia, female chromosomes but a male brain. Most of us hit the jackpot upon birth with all three factors lining up like cherries on a slot machine: Our anatomy, chromosomes and brain cells all correspond as either male or female. But some people are born with variations in one or two of these indicators.
3. Stuff happens at birth that most of us never know. It's not an everyday occurrence but it's also not infrequent that babies are born with ambiguous or incomplete sexual anatomy. In the past, surgeons often made the decision about

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whether this child would be a boy or a girl, based on what was the easiest surgical fix. Today, much more thought is given to these life-changing decisions.

4. Transgender persons are not “transvestites.” Far too many of us make this mix-up, in part because the words sound similar and we have no real knowledge of either. Cross-dressers, identified in slang as “transvestites,” are people (typically men) who are happy with their gender but derive pleasure from occasionally dressing like the opposite gender. Cross-dressing is about something other than gender identity.

5. Transgender persons are not pedophiles. The typical profile of a pedophile is an adult male who identifies as heterosexual and most likely even is married. There is zero statistical evidence to link transgender persons to pedophilia.

6. Transgender persons hate all the attention they’re getting. The typical transgender person wants desperately not to attract attention. All this publicity and talk of bathroom habits is highly disconcerting to people who have spent their lives trying not to stand out or become the center of attention.

7. Transgender persons are the product of nature much more than nurture. Debate the origins of homosexuality if you’d like and what role nature vs. nurture plays. But for those who are transgender, nature undeniably plays a primary role. According to medical science, chromosomal variances occur within moments of conception, and anatomical development happens within the nine months in the womb. There is no nature vs. nurture argument, except in cases of brain development, which is an emerging field of study.

This last point in particular raises the largest of theological questions. If Christians really believe every person is created in the image of God, how can we damn a baby who comes from the womb with gender dysphoria? My pediatrician friend puts it this way: “We must believe that even if some people got a lower dose of a chromosome, or an enzyme, or a hormonal effect, that does not mean that they got a lower dose of God’s image.”

I don’t know much about transgender issues, but I’m trying to learn — in part because I want to understand the way God has made us. For me, this is a theological quest as much as a biological inquiry or a political cause. How about you?

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