

Freedom in a Gender-Confused World

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‘I don’t relate to what people would say defines a girl or a boy, and I think that is what I had to understand: Being a girl isn’t what I hate, it’s the box that I get put into.’¹

Miley Cyrus, May 2015

The issue of gender identity is becoming increasingly prominent in Western society. Biological sex and socio-cultural expressions of gender (masculinity and femininity) have traditionally been understood as correlating in discrete categories. However, this belief is being challenged. The experience of gender dysphoria is a distressing and often-unwanted experience described as a ‘deep and ongoing discomfort with one’s gender identity’.² But proponents of Queer Theory have moved from this phenomenon to deconstruct the traditional view of gender on the basis of radical self-determination. *Gender plasticity* (or *fluidity*) is the view that gender can’t be constrained by a person’s sex or by society’s expectations and norms.³ People may identify with the opposite sex than their biological state, or prefer to identify between or apart from gender labels. Gender is taken to be a choice of the will, and so should not be imposed by others.⁴

In order to understand this issue, we will first examine the philosophical underpinnings of queer theory, and then respond by addressing gender and identity theologically. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the pastoral complexity of gender identity and the need for sensitivity in addressing people who have experienced gender dysphoria in any of its diverse forms.

¹ Mary Emily O’Hara, ‘Miley Cyrus Just Dropped a Bomb about Her Sexuality’, *The Daily Dot* (May 5, 2015), Cited 12 Jul. 2015, Online: <http://www.dailydot.com/entertainment/miley-cyrus-genderqueer-foundation/>.

² Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2015), 17, 19, 60.

³ Peter Sanlon, *Plastic People: How Queer Theory Is Changing Us* (Latimer studies; London: Latimer Trust, 2009), 13–14.

⁴ Sanlon, *Plastic People*, 16, 26.

Philosophical Underpinnings of Gender Plasticity

Queer theory is a relatively new area of philosophy, which has grown in prominence since the 1990s.⁵ It is a deconstructionist movement, having an overt aim to challenge and ‘play with’ the status quo of society.⁶ Its social aims centre on giving a voice to minorities who are believed to be silenced and oppressed by societal norms, which include heterosexuality and the binary view of gender.⁷

Queer theory is ontologically relativistic. The nature of reality, including ethics, is not bound by order or norms.⁸ Rather than a static ‘being’, reality is described in terms of a more fluid ‘becoming’. Accordingly, there is no substantial reality for gender expression based upon biological sex. Gender is simply a series of acts of the will.⁹ In the words of prominent gender theorist Judith Butler,

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990¹⁰

This is not to say that the physical world is rejected. Queer theory aims to challenge what is accepted as fact, but does not seek to deny everything absolutely. Rather it seeks to question presuppositions and discover new possibilities.¹¹

Epistemologically, queer theory is strongly experiential.¹² It began from attempts to understand the experiences of people with gender dysphoria.¹³ Their testimonies are a valued source of

⁵ Sanlon, *Plastic People*, 8–10.

⁶ Sanlon, *Plastic People*, 8.

⁷ Sanlon, *Plastic People*, 8.

⁸ Elaine Storkey, *Created or Constructed?: The Great Gender Debate* ((New College lectures (Sydney, N.S.W.); Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), 107.

⁹ Sanlon, *Plastic People*, 13–19.

¹⁰ Sanlon, *Plastic People*, 16.

¹¹ Sanlon, *Plastic People*, 17–19.

¹² Storkey, *Created or Constructed?*, 45.

knowledge.¹⁴ Sexual feelings or experiences are seen as particularly important in understanding one's identity.¹⁵ Gender is therefore found within experiences and desires, rather than letting biology or culture determine what is appropriate.¹⁶

This combination of ontological relativism and epistemological experientialism is thought to enhance the freedom of the individual to define their identity autonomously.¹⁷ *Freedom* is therefore equated with self-determination.¹⁸ Since gender and sexuality are made central to a person's identity, the idea that another (including God) may define or constrain gender identity is received as a threat to one's most fundamental freedom, and attack on the self.¹⁹

Responding Theologically

Imago Dei: Doctrines of Creation and Anthropology

The Bible introduces humans as creatures made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). As such, humanity cannot be understood in isolation from God and his purposes. Importantly, both male and female are created in God's image. Male and female are of the same generic order in relation to God, one another, and to the rest of creation; they are of one 'kind'.²⁰ What it is to be *imago Dei* has long been the subject of much debate. Calvin locates it chiefly in the soul, which is to 'shine forth' God's glory (*Institutes*, 1.15.3). The nature of humanity as God's image is best understood through its fulfillment in Christ, to whose image the restored humanity is conformed (*Institutes*, 1.15.4). Renewed humanity is restored to true righteousness, holiness, and knowledge,

¹³ Susannah Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology* (Oakville, CT: Equinox Pub. Ltd, 2010), 5–6, 125.

¹⁴ Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ*, 22.

¹⁵ Mark A. Yarhouse and Lori A. Burkett, *Sexual Identity: A Guide to Living in the Time between the Times* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2003), 9–12.

¹⁶ Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ*, 143.

¹⁷ Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ*, 143.

¹⁸ Ron Highfield, *God, Freedom, and Human Dignity: Embracing a God-Centered Identity in a Me-Centered Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2013), 107.

¹⁹ Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ*, 121, 130; Highfield, *God, Freedom, and Human Dignity*, 38–39.

²⁰ Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (2nd ed.; Leicester, England: Apollos, 1994), 32.

meaning that the *imago Dei* is chiefly about moral perfection (*Institutes*, 1.15.4; cf. Col. 3:10). Males and females equally bear God's image, as they are equally called to holiness in Christ. Yet humanity does not exist in isolation from one another, and the image is always expressed through relationship.²¹ The complementary and asymmetrical nature of humanity as male and female is a critical element of humanity's fitness to bear the image of the Triune God.²²

Genesis 2 expands on the binary nature of humanity introduced in Genesis 1, and develops the nature of the relationship between male and female. This passage defines the ordered male-female relationships and gives the grounds for the proper expression of gender the New Testament (cf. 1 Cor 11:2-16, 1 Tim 2:12-15). The order in relationship and role proceeds from the temporal order of creation.²³ Male and female are not exactly the same, nor interchangeable. Their difference in sex is a fundamental distinction, and an integral part of their identity. It is determinative of how they are to understand themselves in relation to one another, and how 'righteousness and holiness' ought to be expressed differently by each in the context of society. Gendered identity and behaviour must stem from God's creation of each person as male or female, as a part of his good design for humanity as his image-bearers.

The significance of the gendered nature of humanity in God's purposes becomes more explicit in the New Testament, as redemption history unfolds. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is particularly pertinent to understanding the order of the relationship between men and women, and the importance of expressing this relationship in gender distinctions. The proper expression of gender is related to reflecting the glory of God as he has revealed himself in the gospel.

²¹ Robert C Doyle, 'Sexuality, Personhood, and the Image of God', in *Personhood, Sexuality and Christian Ministry* (ed. Barry G. Webb; 1st ed.; (Explorations (Sydney, N.S.W.); Sydney: [Moore Theological College], 1986), 46.

²² Mark (Mark Donald) Thompson and Anglican Church of Australia. Diocese of Sydney. Doctrine Commission, *Human Sexuality and the 'Same Sex Marriage' Debate*, 71.

²³ Carrie Sandom, *Different by Design: God's Blueprint for Men and Women* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2012), 46–48.

1 Corinthians 11:3 demonstrates the basis for understanding the relationship and distinction between men and women. Paul speaks of an order in the relationship between men and women who differently imitate Christ.²⁴ As he leads and loves the woman, man reflects Christ in his love for the church. As the woman submits to the man, she reflects Christ's submission to the Father in the economy of salvation. Their relationship is analogous to an aspect of the intra-trinitarian relationship as it is revealed in the gospel.²⁵ God (ὁ θεός) is best understood as referring to the Father (cf. 1 Cor 8:6, where Christ's divinity is also clearly upheld; this view was also accepted by most early church Fathers).²⁶ This does not diminish Christ's divinity, as it is a comment on the relationship of the persons of the Trinity rather than making a distinction within the shared essence of God. The relationship between male/female and Father/Son is analogous, not univocal. Man and woman do not share a single being in the way that God does, so relationships between human persons are also vastly different from intra-Trinitarian relationships.²⁷ Nevertheless, God has so ordered humanity as to point to an aspect of himself as he is revealed in the gospel. This gives great importance to gender distinction as an issue of godliness and morality.

In reflecting God's nature, man and woman glorify God.²⁸ Paul expounds Genesis 2, emphasizing the way in which man and woman are created as necessary complements to one another. 1 Corinthians 11:11-12 shows the mutuality and complementarity of male and female in creation. The similarity and interdependence of the relationship between male and female is emphasised by the adverbs 'just as' (ὡσπερ) and 'in this way' (οὕτως). But there is asymmetry, not equivalence; they depend on one another for their gendered identity in a way that is complementary.²⁹ The man was made first, and woman *from* (ἐκ) man (v.12, cf. Gen 2:21-24).

²⁴ Danny Rurlander, 'Plenary 1: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16' (presented at the Priscilla & Aquila Conference, Moore Theological College, February 2, 2015) <https://www.moore.edu.au/paa>.

²⁵ Doyle, 'Sexuality, Personhood, and the Image of God', 53–55.

²⁶ Peter Bolt, 'Three Heads in the Divine Order: The Early Church Fathers and 1 Corinthians 11:3', *Reform. Theol. Rev.* 64/3 (December 2005): 156.

²⁷ Bolt, 161.

²⁸ Rurlander, 'Plenary 1: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16'.

²⁹ Rurlander, 'Plenary 1: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16'.

Man is not independent of woman, but is *through* woman (ὁ ἄνθρωπος διὰ τῆς γυναικός). Natural birth is not in view here; there is no verb to suggest such a reading. Rather, here also Paul looks to the narrative in Genesis 2, which is concerned with relationship rather than procreation. It is not good for Adam to be alone, but he finds his complement when God creates the woman as his fitting helper (Gen 2:18, 23-24).

The issue of head coverings is concerned with making visible the order that God has created in the world, made for his glory.³⁰ Their unity and complementary expressions of godliness enable them to be the image of God and to fulfill the creation mandate of filling the earth and subduing it, in righteousness and holiness (Gen 1:26-28; Col 3:10). This rightly reflects God's design and the asymmetrical roles of the persons of the Trinity. Right ordering and distinction between men and women thus bears witness to God's glory to the world (and to the watching angels, 1 Cor 11:10, cf. Eph 3:10). What to postmodern Western culture seems an arbitrary and archaic rule is concerned with maintaining order for the sake of the glory of God through his image bearers. To blur or disregard this order fails to honour God's design and end for humanity. Far from being a minor cultural issue, gender distinction is one of the means by which God's glory is revealed.

Autonomy: Doctrine of Sin

Genesis 3 describes the sinful breakdown of the ordered relationships in creation. God reinstates the order, but it is cursed and painful. The Fall affects the particular responsibilities of man and woman, and their relationship with each other. Romans 1:18ff also traces the movement from rejection of God's glory to the distortion of sexuality. All people are guilty of rebellion against God; gender plasticity is just one expression of this.³¹ Furthermore, it is important to recognise that individuals do not live in isolation, and that culture is significant in shaping the particular

³⁰ Rurlander, 'Plenary 1: 1 Corinthians 11:2-16'.

³¹ Thompson and Anglican Church of Australia. Diocese of Sydney. Doctrine Commission, *Human Sexuality and the 'Same Sex Marriage' Debate*, 91.

expressions of sin committed by individuals.³² The experience of gender dysphoria is multifactorial and not well understood; the fallenness of the world and culture means that some people experience feelings of gender dysphoria who do not wish to embrace it.³³

But at the heart of queer theory is radical autonomy. Freedom of the self is found in within, through internal will and experience rather than external referents, including from God's word.³⁴ Queer theory asserts that freedom must include the right to define identity and gender on one's own terms.³⁵ Freedom is seen as the power to designate reality, rather than to discover and live well within it.³⁶ In this view, God is seen as imposing upon and constraining freedom; it is an attitude reminiscent of the kings in Psalm 2:2-3. But the result is what O'Donovan calls 'unfreedom'.³⁷ Divorced from its true end, humanity cannot make right decisions in line with God's design and purpose. In doing so, humanity robs God of his glory, and human relationships that fail to express proper gender distinction also fall short of what they should be.

The freedom offered by gender plasticity is a false freedom. It refuses to locate individuals in communion with God and others, and rejects ontological truth as determinative for behaviour.³⁸ A person's identity is thus insecure, subject to their actions and feelings and vulnerable to perceived threats to these.³⁹ It is also worth noting that this sense of threat and corresponding experience of shame may be unfairly exacerbated by rigid stereotypes, which themselves are cultural rather than biblical (e.g. the muscular Christianity of the early 20th Century).⁴⁰ While there are appropriate constraints on the expression of sex through gendered behaviour, it is vital

³² Thompson and Anglican Church of Australia. Diocese of Sydney. Doctrine Commission, *Human Sexuality and the 'Same Sex Marriage' Debate*, 92.

³³ Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, 60.

³⁴ Highfield, *God, Freedom, and Human Dignity*, 18–21.

³⁵ Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ*, 121, 141; Sanlon, *Plastic People*, 15–17, 37–41.

³⁶ O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 52.

³⁷ O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 109.

³⁸ Sanlon, *Plastic People*, 39–41.

³⁹ Yarhouse and Burkett, *Sexual Identity*, 9–12.

⁴⁰ Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, 56.

to work at discerning these from God's word rather than enforcing unrelated cultural expectations.

Freedom: Doctrines of Grace

The Bible presents a much richer understanding of the self and freedom. Humans are given their ontological being as God's image-bearers. Biblical anthropology is also not individualistic in the postmodern Western sense.⁴¹ Individuals are important and responsible, as people made by God and required to give an account to God for their own life (2 Cor 5:10); but individuals are always located in community (Rom 12:5, 1 Cor 12:27).⁴² They are to understand themselves and their actions in relation to God and to others, and as people who exist by God's will and for his purposes (cf. Rev 4:11). Rather than moving from experience to understand the self, it is a biblical understanding of the created self that interprets experience, including experiences of gender and sexuality.⁴³

Males and females are both responsible before God for their sin. Both face God's wrath and are in need of a Saviour. And both males and females are saved in the same way and to the same inheritance, through faith in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:28, 1 Pet 3:7). Spiritual union with Christ does not obliterate individual identity; God knows his people by name (John 10:3, Rev 2:17, 3:4).⁴⁴ But union with Christ, who is the Image of God, restores and directs a person's identity to be what God intended, and calls and equips them to live out that reality. The freedom of the gospel is to the dignity and status of being children of God (Rom 8:21).⁴⁵ Identification with Christ means that Christians are transferred out of the realm of Adam, with whom they previously identified, and into Christ, receiving righteousness through faith in him (Rom 5:12-21; Col 1:13-

⁴¹ Ben C. Dunson, *Individual and Community in Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament. 2. Reihe; Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 176.

⁴² Dunson, *Individual and Community in Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 179.

⁴³ Highfield, *God, Freedom, and Human Dignity*, 184.

⁴⁴ Brian S Rosner, 'Known by God: The Meaning and Value of a Neglected Biblical Concept', *Tyndale Bull.* 59/2 (2008): 218, 224–225.

⁴⁵ Highfield, *God, Freedom, and Human Dignity*, 183, 188.

14).⁴⁶ Believers spiritually participate with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom 6:1-22). Dying and rising with Christ means Christians are no longer slaves to sin, including their sinful desires (Rom 6:1-22).⁴⁷ Union with Christ means that while individual identity of a person is maintained, an individual cannot understand themselves apart from Christ and his body. God is concerned for individuals and creates much diversity in the body of Christ (John 21:22; 1 Cor 12:4-30; Gal 2:19-20), but his plans for their righteousness and holiness do not tear down his own created order; rather, they uphold it.

Queer theorists recognise that gender is an important aspect of a person's identity, as they make the choice of one's sexuality critical to a person's dignity and freedom of self-expression. But despite their focus on gender, they degrade it by failing to recognise its role and purpose. Gender identity does play a significant purpose in human relationships. The fundamental difference between male and female informs and is expressed in relationship with others of the same and opposite sex. But the primary relationship that determines a person's relationship with others and the world is their relationship with God.⁴⁸ Significance and a secure identity is not self-designated from by individual human wills, but is a gift from God that is born out of his love.⁴⁹

An accurate understanding of identity (who you are) provides the basis for ethical behaviour (what to do). Deeds do not cause one's identity. But they should express it.⁵⁰ Scripture's ethic is not voluntarist, but teleological; living out the identity given to us for the glory of God. This is true freedom; not for licentiousness or autonomy, but freedom from sin to conform to Christ's image and rejoice in God (Rom 8:28-30). In terms of gender, this includes understanding and

⁴⁶ Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 413.

⁴⁷ Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 413.

⁴⁸ Brian S Rosner and Loyola McLean, 'Theology and Human Flourishing: The Benefits of Being 'Known by God'', in *Beyond Well-Being* (ed. Maureen Miner, Martin Dowson, and Stuart Devenish; Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2012), 65–83.

⁴⁹ Highfield, *God, Freedom, and Human Dignity*, 191.

⁵⁰ O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 109–112; Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ*, 377.

valuing our sexuality and genderedness according to the distinctions and commonalities taught in Scripture (e.g. 1 Cor 11:2-16, 14:33-35, Gal 3:28, Eph 5:22-33, Col 3:12-17, 1 Tim 5:1-2, Titus 2:1-6, 1 Pet 3:1-7). While some aspects of the expression of gender will vary between cultures, it is necessary for distinction to be maintained and the created order to be upheld. The place of gender is an important element of identity as part of our created human sexuality, but it must not be absolutised or made subject to the will of the individual.

The freedom found in Christ is not experienced in full until his return. In the meantime, the struggle with sin and suffering continues (Rom 7:7-25). For some, this may manifest in gender dysphoria. God's plan for gendered relationships continues to be difficult to put into practice. But God is at work to conform his people to Christ's image through all things, including suffering and endurance in the battle against sinful desires (Rom 8:28-30, Heb 12:1-2).

Conclusion

“I hope more kids don’t do what I did and sit in their room and cry, thinking ‘I just don’t know what I’m supposed to be,’” she says. “But when I tell kids sometimes, ‘Just be yourself,’ I feel like, ‘I hope you can do that. Can you really do that?’”⁵¹

Miley Cyrus, June 2015

Advocates of gender plasticity hold out the idea of autonomous freedom, cut loose from the created order in terms of God's ordered design in both biology and relationship. But this 'freedom' from God is an expression of humanity's rebellion against God. Far from being a system of oppression, the gospel offers true freedom by finding one's identity in Christ. Human sexuality is indeed important, as a reflection of the glory of God as revealed in the gospel. Gender identity should be received and lived out as a good gift from God. People living in a gender-confused world need to hear of the freedom to be who they are created to be through the redemption and restoration that is found only in Christ.

⁵¹ Katy Steinmetz, 'Miley Cyrus: 'You Can Just Be Whatever You Want to Be'', *Time*, June 15, 2015.

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