

Sex Without Bodies

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Even as our culture has swiftly moved toward accepting same-sex marriage, the term "homosexual" has already disappeared among those who have taken the time to listen and learn from gay and lesbian neighbors and friends. For good reasons, the preferred language among those neighbors has become "LGBT"—"Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered" (or "Transsexual").

We should welcome this shift, because it actually helps clarify the multiple sexualities whose representatives have banded together to seek legal recognition and relief from stigma and shame. Indeed, the initialism LGBT is increasingly augmented by references to Queer (or Questioning) and Asexual persons—thus including those who find their sexuality ill-defined by the existing heterosexual or homosexual categories. It also often seeks to include Intersex individuals, the small but real number of persons whose bodies are born gender-ambiguous.

The proliferation of initials signals the formation of a powerful coalition. But it also reminds us of the important differences between the members of that coalition. Christians cannot simply accept or reject "same-sex marriage" and think we have settled our sexual ethics. The LGBTQIA coalition has other challenges for the church.

Begin just with those who identify as lesbian and as gay. Patterns of sexual expression, relationship formation, and identity discovery are markedly different between gay men and lesbian women. Statistically speaking, gay sexual orientation seems most often to emerge early, definitively, and persistently; lesbian orientation is more fluid and ambiguous. (This has implications, too, for claims of "recovery" from homosexuality, claims that have often proven unreliable for "ex-gay" men.)

The Next Frontier

Indeed, sex itself is markedly different for gays and lesbians, research shows. Men in stable, committed gay relationships readily "[make] open arrangements for sex outside the couple," as a recent *New York Times* article put it; indeed, more than 40 percent have done so.

Meanwhile, large numbers of women in committed lesbian relationships seem to cease sexual activity altogether over time. These are not just male and female versions of a single simple thing called "homosexuality," let alone merely "homosexual" versions of a single simple thing called "sexuality"—they are profoundly different human experiences.

Bisexuality raises even more complicated questions, and it is the next frontier that church leaders, whatever their position on "homosexuality," will confront. Some Christian leaders have come to believe that blessing same-sex unions is the best pastoral response to those with a persistent same-sex orientation who seek covenant faithfulness. But what about someone who does not report a stable orientation? Should the church in any way steer them toward marriage to the opposite sex? Even the slightest bias toward male–female complementarity may soon be considered just as bigoted as believing that gay and lesbian relationships cannot be blessed at all.

This leads to the fourth term of the sexual-minority coalition: persons who experience themselves as transgendered (meaning a psychological dissonance, as distinct from the physical ambiguity of intersex persons)—"trapped" in the wrong body. This is yet another difficult pastoral challenge, since it is not about gender preferences in one's partners (transgendered people report all four possible combinations of "orientations") but about one's own identity as a man or woman. The reported experiences of transgender persons also raise the most complex hermeneutical questions, since there are not obvious biblical texts that address the issue. (Jesus' reference to "those who are born eunuchs" may well refer to the phenomenon of intersex births, known to ancients just as much as to us today.) How should the church compassionately respond to reports of intense psychological distress relating to one's biological or socially assigned gender?

And then we must attend to those who identify as "queer," "questioning," or "asexual"—who otherwise would check "none of the above" and see even this spectrum of categories as far too narrow to accommodate their personal experiences, desires, and preferences.

Nobody's Body

There is really only one conviction that can hold this coalition of disparate human experiences together. And it is the irrelevance of bodies—specifically, the irrelevance of biological sexual differentiation in how we use our bodies.

What unites the LGBTQIA coalition is a conviction that human beings are not created male and female in any essential or important way. What matters is not one's body but one's heart—the seat of human will and desire, which only its owner can know.

Christians will have to choose between two consistent positions. One, which we believe Christians who affirm gay and lesbian unions will ultimately have to embrace, is to say that embodied sexual differentiation is irrelevant—completely, thoroughly, totally irrelevant—to covenant faithfulness. The proof text for this view will be that in Christ, there is neither male nor female. And as with all readings based on proof texts, upholding it will require openly discarding a vast expanse of other biblical material, the many biblical voices (including Jesus') that affirm and elucidate the significance of male-and-female creation.

As this view gains traction in our culture, the created givenness of bodies must give way to the achievement of ascertaining, announcing, and fulfilling one's own internally discerned desires, with no normative reference to the body one happens to inhabit. It is no accident that as normative sexuality has been redefined, from an essentially exterior reality uniting male and female bodies to an essentially interior reality expressing one's heart, the charges of bigotry have been heard more fiercely against those who hold the traditional Christian view. How dare we Christians speak against any person's heart?

Marriage, which has always been "unequal," yoking together two very different kinds of bodies, must now be "equal," measured only by the sincerity of one's love and commitment. To insist on the

importance of bodies is to challenge the sovereign self, to suggest that our ethical options are limited by something we did not choose.

There is one other consistent position that Christians can hold, though we will hold it at great social cost, at least for the foreseeable future: that bodies matter. Indeed, that both male and female bodies are of ultimate value and dignity—not a small thing given the continuing denigration of women around the world.

Indeed, that *matter* matters. For behind the dismissal of bodies is ultimately a gnostic distaste for embodiment in general. To uphold a biblical ethic on marriage is to affirm the sweeping scriptural witness—hardly a matter of a few isolated "thou shalt not" verses—that male and female together image God, that the creation of humanity as male and female is "very good," and that "it is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18, NRSV).

Sexual differentiation (along with its crucial outcome of children, who have a biological connection to two parents but are not mirror images of either one) is not an accident of evolution or a barrier to fulfillment. It is in fact the way God is imaged, and the way fruitfulness, diversity, and abundance are sustained in the world.

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