

Book Review

Andrew T. Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say about Gender Identity?* (The Good Book Company, 2022), 201 pp. \$16.99

Reviewed by Robert Henry

GIVEN THE CLIMATE OF OUR CULTURE in recent years, some have found it necessary to articulate a Christian response to the issue of transgenderism from a theological perspective. And yet, this topic is clearly one that elicits significantly passionate and generally contentious debates. And so, here I will offer a review of Andrew Walker's *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say about Gender Identity?* Therefore, as in any discussion on this issue, Walker emphasizes the position that the Christian faith first and foremost seeks to emulate a Christ-like approach of sensitivity and gentleness. In the opening chapter of his book, Walker quotes Matthew 12:20: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench."

Walker provides a brief overview of his book, where he first seeks to identify the problem and explain how we, as a culture, have arrived at this point where we are today. He then, through chapters 5 to 7, offers a detailed analysis of the biblical foundation and articulation of gender and its distinction. From chapters 8 to 11, Walker presents practical ways to approach the problem and, in his own words, grounds an appropriate understanding of transgenderism in the "real lives of ordinary people" (9).

Chapter 2 is entitled "How We Got Where We Are." Here, Walker recounts probably one of the most famous examples of a celebrity transgender individual, Bruce Jenner's transformation to Caitlyn. This high-profile individual's struggle with the feeling of "being born in the wrong body" forced our culture to wrestle with the authenticity of transgenderism. Ultimately, Walker argues that there has been a rise of relativism in truth and ethics, along with our culture's post-Christian identity and a hyper-individualism that prioritizes individual "lived experiences" over objective truths. All of this is influenced by the effects of the sexual revolution and how it "sever[ed] the connection between sex and procreation," as well as a reimagining of the ancient Christian heresy of Gnosticism, which "emphasizes that a person's self-awareness is different than and more important than their physical body" (18). Walker explains that the two cardinal sins of post-modernism are judging and repressing one's desires.

Chapter 3, entitled “The Language,” examines terms that have taken on significantly different meanings in recent years compared to their past connotations. The terms he explores include “sex,” “gender,” “gender identity,” “gender dysphoria,” and “transgender.” Walker explains that “sex” refers to both an individual’s biological make-up and composition, as well as “primary sex characteristics,” which include reproductive systems, and “secondary sex characteristics,” such as broader shoulders in males. According to Walker, terms like “gender” or “gender identity” contrast with sex, where the former are expressions of sexual differences that vary across cultures (such as men wearing kilts in Scotland), yet they have traditionally been linked to sexual differences. However, today, this expression doesn’t necessarily have to be connected to sexual difference, and as Walker later explains, it is not a biblical view.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 examine the foundation for forming a specific perspective on the transgender debate, what a Biblical view entails, and how confusion about gender has arisen from a fallen creation. In “On Making a Decision,” Walker challenges the reader to evaluate his or her worldview. The authority from which one derives knowledge and trustworthiness about what one believes is crucial. He describes the modern view as deriving authority from one’s *self*. However, the critique stems from the question, “Do I really know myself that well? I have never lived before. I may identify a problem with my fulfillment, but I cannot know I have rightly identified the solution. I don’t know how I will feel, who I will be, or what I will need tomorrow or next year, let alone in a decade” (36). Therefore, this perspective of considering transgender “feelings” as authentic, reliable, and trustworthy is unlikely to be sound. However, if we find that the Bible offers a “better story” about who and what we are, then we should reject this postmodern authority for truth.

In the chapter titled “Well-Designed,” Walker then shifts from selecting a worldview to determining what that worldview asserts about the nature of gender. Walker notes that Scripture emphasizes the importance of the body and its male/female bifurcation. These are not merely naturally occurring features, but God-designed works of creation. In “Beauty and Brokenness,” Walker explores the nature of our fallen state. He explains how a single act of defiance and rebellion led to our hearts being divided into two distinct parts: our desires and our sense of right and wrong. Therefore, Walker writes, “In the same way that fallen desires pervade the hearts of all of us, individuals with gender dysphoria experience real feelings of distress about their gender identity. These are authentic experiences, where their heart’s desire is telling them one thing about themselves while their body is saying something else. No one should dismiss this, or belittle this, or joke about this. To feel this way is to experience real, deep pain” (69). Nonetheless, these dysphoric experiences do not reflect who and what we are in our bodies, according to the divine plan of God’s creation.

In chapter 7, Walker shares the story of an individual named Evan who was assigned “female” at birth but later transitioned to a man. He gave birth to a child after his transition, creating the paradox of a man giving birth. Walker uses this story to highlight the emotional and mental struggles some face when feeling like a man while their body is that of a woman. However, as the chapter title suggests, there is “A Better Future” for those in Christ. Ultimately, gender dysphoria does not need to be treated as a special category of struggles associated with the fall of man. Just as one grapples with envy or pride, we can also wrestle with disassociated feelings toward our bodies that do not align with our created order of sex/gender. This discussion on understanding gender dysphoria in light of our fallen nature leads to an opportunity for Walker to talk about “Love Your Neighbor” in chapter 8. He explains that as Christians, we should take this opportunity to demonstrate compassion and empathy grounded in truth-telling.

In “No Easy Paths,” Walker reassures those struggling with gender dysphoria that the internal conflicts they face are similar to other struggles depicted in Scripture. He asks us to reflect on Christ’s words about taking up our crosses to follow him, as well as Paul’s struggles, which, despite much prayer and supplication, remained with the caveat that “my grace is sufficient.” Moreover, the church must be a place where individuals with gender dysphoria are welcomed and heard without compromising the truth of God’s Word. In “Challenging the Church,” Walker reminds Christians that we should be loving and accepting, and also allow those without a voice to be heard. He states, “If you or your church tends to listen and love but bend the truth in your attempt to love, the challenge is: hold to the truth, even as you love—remember that loving someone is not the same as agreeing with them, and sometimes loving someone requires you to disagree” (133).

In chapter 11, Walker also addresses some of the most challenging questions about transgender issues, including how to speak with children. He suggests that we be honest and open with children, rather than shrugging our shoulders, avoiding the issue, or giving a polarized response like “they are just crazy.” Therefore, we need to be “wise as a parent...balancing a desire to protect your child from the world with the need to prepare them for the world” (139).

In the final chapters 12 and 13, Walker concludes with “Tough Questions” related to transgender issues and also offers “Open Hands” to those dealing with gender dysphoria, emphasizing the importance of approaching these issues with care, empathy, and understanding. The book ends much like it starts, focusing on Christian compassion and acceptance.

While the issue of transgenderism and how Christians should respond to its theological and ethical implications is complex, it is clear that it has sparked much controversy. Although many Christians and secularists are divided on the issue,

Andrew Walker presents a comprehensive Christian reflection on the causes, status, and legitimacy of transgender identity. By anchoring concepts of sex and gender in created categories of humans divided into male and female, Walker associates gender dysphoria with a fallen state of being, which is no less legitimate than the struggles with various disordered desires. In short, Andrew Walker's *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say about Gender Identity?* provides a thorough, compassionate, and insightful analysis of the transgender debate and its connection to the Church. Anyone interested in a clear and thoughtful look at this issue and how Christians should respond is encouraged to read this book.

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