

When the Transgender Issue Comes Home

A close friend called to tell me that I had a new brother. After nearly 20 years as four sons and one daughter, my family scratched another tally mark in the ledger column already chock-full of boys. “Have you heard about Jessah?” she asked. “She just announced on Facebook that she’s transgender.”

My new brother, it would seem, is my sister.

Jessah is 19 years old, 12 years younger than I am. I was in the hospital when she was born. I spent my middle-school years changing her diapers. She beamed with pride and excitement when my then-fiancée Becca asked her to be a bridesmaid at our wedding, and during the ceremony she looked just as beautiful and twice as proud as the older girls. Becca offered advice when she was learning to put on makeup, when puberty arrived, when she first started noticing and crushing on boys.

Today, though, Jessah identifies as a man. “I am not female,” she declared in her coming out announcement. She is legally changing her name to Jace and plans to undergo hormone treatment therapy and gender reassignment surgery as soon as possible. In the meantime, she is presenting herself as a male.

What was once a distant and theoretical discussion—How do Christians respond to the transgender issue?—suddenly became immediate and practical. Abstract became concrete; impersonal, personal. This isn’t just the cover of *Time* magazine, it’s Christmas dinner. It’s e-mails and phone calls, weddings and funerals, kids’ birthday parties and Mother’s Day luncheons. This big question facing me and my wife is wrapped up in a hundred smaller questions:

Do we speak of my sister or my brother? Jessah or Jace? She or he? And what exactly is the Christian witness on gender issues, anyway? How do we affirm a biblical sexual ethic and our love for my sister at the same time? Even more difficult: How do we resolve the tensions between loving my sister on the one hand, and, on the other, training up our children in the way they should go?

As the transgender issue muscles its way into the mainstream, more Christians will struggle with how to respond to friends and family members who identify as a gender different than their biological sex. Here are a few things we have learned along the way.

Begin with love. A Christian response must be rooted in love ([Galatians 5:14](#)), and the first step is to affirm that love directly and unconditionally. My immediate response—even before the shock had worn off—was to fire off a quick e-mail: “Heard the news and wanted to let you know I love you.” Later, I told Jessah that whether she identified as a sister or a brother, she would always be family. I assured her that nothing, including disagreements over issues of gender and sexuality, can change my deep love for her. Whatever else would come, it would start from this love.

Acknowledge that a response is necessary. Thanks in part to the English language, with its unavoidably gendered pronouns (he or she, him or her), there is no neutral ground or convenient third way with the transgender issue. We can’t talk about—no, we can’t even think about—this situation without docking our boat at one pier or the other. With my sister, some people advised us to defer to her wishes and adopt all the trappings of her new identity: name,



pronouns, kit and caboodle. Others advised us to hold the line and refuse to budge. In the end, Becca and I decided that out of respect and as an attempt to live peaceably, so far as it depends on us ([Romans 12:18](#)), we would call my sister by her new name, Jace. Yet we haven't transitioned to masculine pronouns, because we can't refer to her as a man without embracing the claims about sex and gender that make possible her transgender identity.

Don't respond only according to personal experience or feelings. Many people “evolve” in their beliefs about gender and sexuality when someone they know and love comes out of the closet. Yet we must be careful to allow God's revealed truth to shape how we understand our experiences, rather than the other way around. My personal suffering does not change the goodness of God. My sure and certain grasp of elementary arithmetic does not change the glorious mysteries of the Trinity (1 = 3) or the hypostatic union (1 + 1 = 1). And my genuine affection, good will, and belief in the dignity of transgender people can never change what God, the author of gender, has authoritatively revealed in his Word.

Ground yourself in faithful explication of the Bible. There's much more to say about this issue, but we can start in Genesis: God has made us in his image, and we reflect that image as gendered creatures—male or female—from the moment of creation ([Genesis 1:27](#)). “God did not make us into undifferentiated genderless automatons,” Denny Burk writes in a chapter of *Good: The Joy of Christian Manhood and Womanhood*. “Gender norms, therefore, have their roots in God's good creation and are revealed in nature and Scripture.” And so we affirm with the apostle Paul that everything created by God—including these gender norms—is good and should not be rejected ([1 Timothy 4:4](#)). Yet my sister is doing just that: rejecting the goodness of her biologically female body and exchanging it for the image of a man.

Confess your own sin and recognize your need for God's grace. Like my sister, I have experienced, and continue to experience, ways in which my own sexuality and understanding of my gender fall short of what Jesus intends and calls me to. When it comes to our sins and shortcomings, we are the same; she is what I once was, and what I would still be but for the grace of God ([1 Corinthians 6:11](#)). There is no room for condemnation or superiority at the foot of the cross. Christians instead respond in humility, extending to our transgender friends and family members a measure of the grace that God has given us in Christ. We were not redeemed in order to point fingers, start fights, and hurl stones ([Colossians 3:12](#)).

Involve your local church. It was clear from the get-go that this issue was out of my league, so I contacted my pastor and another elder to discuss practical and theological considerations, and to help guide our response. It was good to have godly, wise counsel double-check our thinking, and it is still a comfort to know that the church was and is praying for us, for my sister, and for my whole family.

Assess your personal situation. Much of how you respond will depend on your own, immediate situation, including the nature of your relationship with the transgender individual, whether he or she is a fellow Christian, and other considerations. For our part, high on our priority list is sheltering our two young sons (ages 1 and 5) from affirmations of alternate visions of gender and sexuality—especially while they're too young to put language to their perceptions of gender, while they have no concept of sex or sexuality, and while introducing them to ideas like “transgender” will only confuse the truth. We cannot in good conscience tell our boys that their Aunt Jessah is now their Uncle Jace, but my family has made it clear that refusing to do so would be considered offensive, intolerant, and unacceptable. So we made the difficult decision to isolate them from this issue, and from my sister, until they are older and able to navigate questions of gender and sexuality at a more age-appropriate level.

Respond in love. Through it all, we're committed to ensuring that our personal relationships with Jessah are characterized by genuine love, which goes out of its way to show affection and honor even as it clings to the truth ([Romans 12:9–10](#)). She needs to know—from our words and our actions—that she will never have anything to fear from us. We won't condemn or hate or mistreat her; we won't dismiss or snub or intentionally offend her. We will never bully her. Together, we have committed to treating her well. This doesn't mean things will always be comfortable or easy (they won't) or that we check our convictions at the door whenever we see her (we don't), only that we treat her with the same kindness and respect with which we would treat any other family member.

Do your part to keep communication open. Because our boundaries with the boys have implications for holidays and get-togethers, I e-mailed my immediate family in hopes of mitigating any future conflict by addressing the issue up front. I offered to meet for a respectful, face-to-face discussion with anyone who had questions about our decision or our decision-making process. I committed to being as transparent and clear as possible. In the meantime, though, maintaining relationships and communications has meant a lot of small talk. Not every single discussion needs to include a call to repentance. But we must never forget that we're called to witness to the truth and freedom of the gospel—and it's hard to talk to someone about Christ when you're not talking with them at all.

My sister cannot find hope in surgeries and hormone therapy, but in the gospel alone. In the introduction to *Good*, Owen Strachen reminds us: "The gospel, in short, saves us, remakes us, and helps us understand who we truly are and what we are called to be for God's glory and our joy." I pray that I and my family might be instruments of mercy, used by the Holy Spirit to help make my sister whole. I pray that she might come to understand who she truly is, and who she is called to be.

Josh Bishop is a professional writer who lives and works in West Michigan. Find him on Twitter [@joshbishop](#).

-

Copyright © 2014 The Gospel Coalition, Inc. All rights reserved.