

# Editorial: Loving our transgender neighbors

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The first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. The second command is like it—to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

It's not just the Bible saying it. It's Jesus saying it.

When it comes to transgender, many point to another Scripture—Genesis 1:27: “Male and female God created them.”

The longer passage reads: “God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, according to our likeness.’ ... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them” and told them to be fruitful and multiply, to fill, subdue and rule over all living things (Genesis 1:26-28 NASB).

For many, the discussion ends here. Or it's where many want the discussion to end.

But the world is a more complicated place than that. It's a place where some people, for whatever reason, do not situate themselves neatly in one of two categories—male and female. It's a place Christians are expected to engage through love. And not just any love—God's love.

## A framework for love

Alan Noble, associate professor of English at Oklahoma Baptist University and widely published writer on Christianity and culture, provides a helpful framework for this engagement.

During a March 19 keynote address at East Texas Baptist University, Noble [called for the cultivation of four virtues](#): humility, desiring the good of others, prudence and fortitude.

The following is from an audio recording of Noble's keynote furnished to me by ETBU.

## **Humility**

"All wisdom involves humility," Noble said.

"Humility means not assuming that you are an expert on every topic. ... Humility means knowing what you don't know, and accepting that you don't know, and that others probably know a lot more than you do," Noble continued.

"Humility means honestly and openly listening to and considering different points of view" without prior assumptions about another person's perspective, he said. Importantly, "openness to ideas does not require you to accept ideas," Noble noted.

## **Desiring the good of others**

Loving our neighbor begins with humility. Loving our neighbor means desiring our neighbor's good, Noble said.

"Desiring the good of the other does not mean that you desire whatever the other person wants," he said, but does involve wanting the other person to know the truth.

Rather than actually desiring the good of others, however, we often desire that those with whom we disagree be shamed and punished, Noble cautioned.

He also warned that desiring the good of others "will be costly. It will take

more work and will demand more of your time.”

Desiring the good of the other means we communicate with others in a way that invites them to see the truth, rather than coercing them into our view of the truth, Noble said.

## **Prudence and fortitude**

We do not always need to speak or be the one who speaks. It is prudence, not cowardice, to know when not to speak, Noble explained.

Fortitude, or courage, means being “willing to lose social standing to speak for the truth.” Prudence should guide fortitude, so our courage does not become reckless, Noble warned.

## **A Christian response**

These four virtues are relevant to how Christians interact with the issue of transgender, a topic brought to the fore last week by a [presidential proclamation](#). We must not let the proclamation divert us from our duty to love our neighbors—including our transgender neighbors. What that love may look like is a source of much debate.

As Christians try to fulfill their obligation to love, we must not overlook two simple facts: Transgender people are created in the image of God no less than anyone else, and therefore are worthy of compassion no less than anyone else.

Whatever one’s position is on transgender, these two things are non-negotiable: Transgender people are created in the image of God, and Jesus commanded us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

If we think a transgender person is anything less than our neighbor, then we are deeming that transgender person as less than or other than human.

I am certain that attempt to qualify our love will not stand up to scrutiny when we stand before our Maker.

## How to love

Christ's followers are expected to interact with our transgender neighbors through love. And not just any love—God's love.

We can love our transgender neighbors well by moving beyond typical caricatures of transgender people to learn more about the complexity of transgender.

We can love our transgender neighbors well by listening to their stories. Their stories are just as important as ours, illuminating how we came to be who, what and where we are now.

We also can love our transgender neighbors well by remembering they are whole persons, not simply gender identities. We can offer dignity, honor and respect when we take the time to discover their interests, gifts and talents—some of which we may share—or by following Jesus' example and eating a meal together.

We can read books like *Talking to Kids about Gender Identity: A Roadmap for Christian Compassion, Civility, and Conviction* by Mark Yarhouse and *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church and What the Bible Has to Say* by Preston Sprinkle.

Neither book is perfect, but they are a helpful start toward understanding transgender by providing language and research alongside a biblical and Christian perspective.

While learning can be helpful, knowledge is not sufficient for fulfilling our obligation to love our neighbor. There must be more, and Noble's framework helps here.

# Remembering what Jesus did

Our love for our transgender neighbors must be built on humility. Humility does not make our transgender neighbors the object of shame, contempt or hostility, but recognizes each of us contains brokenness in need of Christ's redemption and restoration.

Rather than heaping shame on a transgender person, we must remember what we as Christians just commemorated and celebrated.

We spent the last week remembering Christ bore our shame to the point of death, even death on a cross, and that he told us that to follow him means denying ourselves and taking up our own cross.

The week of commemoration culminated in our celebration of Christ's rising from the dead to defeat sin and shame, and that he invites us, calls us to share in his everlasting life. What invitation are we issuing to our transgender neighbors?

## The challenge

If we were to ask transgender people that question, I am certain they would say "invitation" is the wrong word. They would say we condemn without inviting. They would say we have generated more fear than Christlike love.

Our transgender neighbors should not be afraid to be in our presence. They should not be afraid we will revile them, berate them or otherwise harm them, even as we hold to our convictions about gender. This is possible—even if not easy—if we humbly, compassionately and prudently communicate our convictions—in word *and* deed.

Our foundational and guiding conviction is love. And not just any love—God's love.

As Noble pointed out, loving our neighbor does not mean anything goes. It does mean when we interact with a transgender person, we will treat that person as a human being, not a cause. Our words and our actions will convey dignity, honor and respect that should be accorded any human being.

Some will accuse me of arguing for affirmation of transgender and all that goes with it. No, I'm asking us to do something much harder than that.

I'm asking us to hold our biblical convictions about gender while extending as much compassion, dignity, honor and respect toward transgender people as we expect to be extended toward us.

Why? Because the first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with *all* our heart *and* soul *and* mind *and* strength. The second command is like it—to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

This love cost our Lord his life.

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