



*A PARENT'S
GUIDE TO*

TEACHING YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT GENDER

**HELPING KIDS
NAVIGATE A
CONFUSING
CULTURE**

JARED KENNEDY

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INTRODUCTION

Pastor John received a phone call from his friend, Rodney, who serves in ministry in another state. Rodney is a jovial guy, and John always enjoys talking with him about ministry and family. This day, their conversation was different. When John picked up the phone, he could tell right away that something was wrong. Rodney's pre-teen daughter had always been more of a tomboy—preferring sports and skateboarding to dolls, jeans and sweatshirts to dresses. But a few days before the call she'd given him a shock. She pulled her mom and dad aside to tell them that she now identifies as male instead of female. The revelation shocked Rodney and his wife. They were left spinning.

LIVING IN A GENDER-FLUID WORLD

We live in a time that grows increasingly accepting of gender-fluid identities. At time of writing, the social media website Facebook gives users seventy-one different gender options. In a recent peer-reviewed study, Lisa Littman, Assistant Professor of Behavioral and Social Sciences at Brown University, suggests that within the particular friend groups she studied, adolescent and college-age girls experienced increased popularity after coming out as transgender.¹

Because of these rapid cultural changes, conversations like the one I've described above aren't going away any time soon. Gender identity will continue to be a regular topic for Christian parents. Knowing this doesn't necessarily make it easier to process. Christian parents feel a flood

of emotions when their teenage daughter announces, “I want to be known as Joe instead of Joan.” It can be overwhelming and even devastating to hear such news. When a daughter announces that she now identifies as a boy, her choice to wear a baseball cap backwards may take on new meaning. Before it seemed like a harmless fashion statement. Now it raises your blood pressure.

Beyond the uncomfortable emotions involved, navigating conversations about gender and sex with our children means exploring emotional, moral, personal, and theological matters—serious subjects. Most parents feel a lot of pressure to respond perfectly. We’re afraid if things go sideways and our children choose to reject our values and beliefs, it could be our fault for not handling the teachable

moment well. It’s easy to feel paralyzed by what we should or shouldn’t say and do. If we’re honest, we feel desperate and ill equipped.

In this book, I want to help you navigate these difficult conversations. I want to link arms with you and search the Scriptures together to learn how to respond to our children biblically as we raise them in a broken world. But before we begin exploring how to help our kids navigate this

Gender Identity—A term that is used in our culture to refer to an individual’s personal sense of identity as masculine or feminine, or some combination of each. This involves my self-understanding—how I think about myself.²

Gender-Fluid—A term used for people who prefer to be flexible when expressing their gender identity.

Transgender—An umbrella term for the state or condition of identifying and expressing a gender identity that does not match a person’s biological/genetic sex.

gender-confused culture, it's important to confess just how weak and desperate we are.

WE ARE DESPERATE

None of us are experts. None of us have it all together. The older my kids get, the more it becomes clear I can't control their destiny. Their future, health, will and desires for life, whether or not they will marry, who they will choose as a spouse, and even how long they will live—all this belongs to God. My attempts to control outcomes are fruitless. Our children's self-conceptions about their gender are ultimately out of our hands. There's a part of me that's afraid to write down my thoughts on this topic. What if my own children reject God's path? I can speak truth, but only God can turn their hearts.

The pressures and deep emotions we feel at such difficult junctures reveal that we know the stakes. But these emotions can also expose a misplaced faith. Often, we're trusting in our parenting—our methods of discipline or the choices we've made about screen time and education—to ensure our kids will turn out well. You know this is true. When our kids are cute and we're posting fun pictures of our family vacation on Instagram, we feel like we've made it. But when we encounter something our favorite parenting book didn't cover, or when the parenting method we've trusted begins to let us down, we start to freak out.

I'm learning that this place of weakness and desperation is precisely where God wants us. When we are most vulnerable, we find Christ's abundant strength (2 Cor. 12:9). As Martin Luther once wrote, "It is certain that a man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ."³ I find it incredibly encouraging when moms and dads admit they need guidance. Honest parents know they need help, and asking for it is a holy thing.

In the pages that follow, you'll find a series of six conversation topics designed to help you communicate a biblical framework for gender and sexuality to your children. My prayer is that you'll lead in these

conversations with vulnerability about your own brokenness as well as the kind of gentleness that can only come from first experiencing God's mercy yourself. As you press into the chapters that follow, have confidence in God's good plans for your children. In the midst of the brokenness and confusion of this life, God is faithful to keep those who trust him and to intercede for us, especially when we are weak (1 Thess. 4:3, 8; Rom. 8:26-27).

CHAPTER 1

CELEBRATE!

Celebrate the gift of being made in God's image, male and female.

My favorite scene in the original *Toy Story* movie (1995) takes place at the Dinoco Station. Woody and Buzz fight, and their squabble sends them falling out of the minivan onto the concrete. The argument goes on for a moment when, suddenly, Woody stops. He looks up and watches in horror as Andy and his mom drive away. Woody chases after the car for a few steps. "Doesn't he realize I'm not there?" he shouts, "I'm lost. Oh, I'm a lost toy!" In that moment, Woody experiences deep anguish, because he knows who he is. You see, the toys in the world of Disney and Pixar's *Toy Story* movies want nothing more than to bring joy to their owners. They want to love and be loved by *their* kid.

Buzz Lightyear's reaction fascinates me in this scene. He doesn't understand the importance of catching up with Andy. He doesn't understand the great tragedy of being lost. Buzz thinks he's a real spaceman having an adventure on an uncharted planet; he doesn't know he's a toy. What Buzz can't see is that he's more lost than he knows.

We are just like the toys in those movies. The toys are lost without Andy, and we're lost without God. God made us in his likeness, as his children—to love and be loved by him. God made people as his representatives. If we try to take account of our lives without considering the One for whom we

were made or how he made us, we're as lost as Buzz Lightyear.

So, how did God make us? It's important to teach two foundational truths to our kids about how our gender relates to being made in God's image: (1) God made two sexes, and (2) implicit in our creation as male and female sexually is the expression of our sex in two complementary genders.

First, God made two sexes—male and female. Right at the

beginning, God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness...male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:26-27). According to these verses, the biological difference between men and women—our biological sex—is a fundamental part of God's design. Our sex is a part of who we are as well as a part of what it means to be made in God's image.⁴

The term *biological sex* refers to the difference between male and female that is inscribed on our bodies in at least four different ways—our genetic code (XX for females and XY for males),⁵ our genitals, the brain and hormone chemistry within our bodies, and in such secondary sex characteristics as our hair growth patterns and muscular-skeletal structure.

Kids need to know their bodies are gifts from God, and they need to learn about these differences. Gaining awareness of their bodies and learning appropriate names for body parts gives young kids a foundation for understanding biological sex and gender. This can start with toddlers, who for their safety need to be taught the proper names for their genitals and about what kinds of touches are appropriate.⁶ Young children need to understand some parts of their bodies are private and should only be

Biological Sex—refers to the difference God assigns between male and female, inscribed on the body through our genetic code, our genitals, the brain and hormone chemistry within our bodies, and in secondary sex characteristics such as hair growth patterns and muscular-skeletal structure.

touched when they need help in the bathroom, need help bathing, or during a doctor's visit. During the adolescent years, continuing these conversations can help teens know they aren't crazy as their bodies change and they experience new impulses and desires.

Second, God breathed life into man and woman—two people with complementary gender expressions. *Gender* is a term that, historically, was synonymous with biological sex. As a Christian, I affirm that gender is who I am biologically according to God's created design. This is my *true gender*, who I am according to God. In this sense, a man or woman's gender is never fluid. It cannot become whatever we want it to be, because it's a part of our personhood.⁷ I love how my own local church's doctrinal statement celebrates this: "Gender is a fundamental given of human existence, with maleness and femaleness being congruent with human embodiment and being an unchangeable, stable, and consistent characteristic of each image bearer established by God's creational intent."⁸

But the term "gender" can be used in two additional ways as well:

Gender identity is a term used in our culture to refer to an individual's personal sense of identity as masculine or feminine, or some combination of each. It involves self-understanding—how people think about themselves.

Let's distinguish between my true *gender* and my *gender identity*: God has purposes for my (Jared's) gender. He designed me to be a man. But I could think of myself as a man or a woman. My sense of who I am, that is, my self-understanding, may match up or differ with God's intentions and design for my gender.

There is also a third way the word "gender" is used. It's used to denote the behavioral traits and roles that are typically associated with one's biological sex within families or society in general. We'll call this *gender expression*. It's the enculturated ways people reflect their biological sex or gender identity in relationships.

Let's distinguish between my *true gender* and *gender expression*: Again, God has purposes for my (Jared's) gender. He designed me to be a man. In the culture where I was raised (the American South of the 1980s and 90s), the male gender was typically associated with macho traits like shooting guns, loving action-adventure movies, or driving a Z-71 pick-up truck. Such traits are *enculturated*. They're rooted in society and culture.

If I were to wear a skirt, a form of dress typically associated with the female sex in American life, my wife would be confused, and my male friends might be tempted to mock me. But if you stick me on a plane overseas to Indonesia, then I could wear a sarong wrap, and I'd fit right in with Indonesian brothers in Christ.

God designed two different genders with differing gender expressions. The goal of making man and woman in this way was so they might together depict the kind of complementary relational life the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have eternally shared with one another. God made man and woman to live together, reflecting his glory. While God made each person to represent him in some unique way, we need both women

Gender—a term that, historically, was synonymous with biological sex. As Christians, we must affirm that gender is who we are according to God's created design—either a man or a woman. This is our true gender—who a person is according to God. But we should also recognize that the word gender is used to describe a person's gender identity, their self-understanding of their gender, as well as their gender expression, the behavioral traits and roles associated with a person's biological sex or gender identity within a given society.

and men—with their complementary gender expressions—to get a complete picture of God's loving character.

The Bible binds our biology and engendered ways of living together. In the garden, *gender expression* matched the man and woman's *true gender*. In the culture of Genesis 2, the masculine gender reflected the order God exercises over his creation. The Lord formed Adam from the ground (2:7), and then he placed the man in the garden to bring order to it, "to work [the ground] and take care of it" (2:15). A few verses later, God sent Adam to classify and name all of the beasts (Gen. 2:19–20). Adam is structuring and ordering God's world like the image-bearing scientist God made him to be. In a distinct way, the feminine gender reflected God's nurturing relationality (Is. 49:15; 66:13). The woman is the suitable helper for whom Adam had been looking. Her creation made human relationships possible (Gen. 2:18, 21–22). God orients the woman toward community (Gen. 2:22)—to give help to and influence the man as her companion.

After putting man and woman together, God went one step further. He commissioned the man and woman to *work* together (Gen. 1:28). As a married couple, the man and woman took on distinct roles to accomplish God's purposes. As Hannah Anderson and Wendy Alsup describe:

By creating them as male and female, God invested their bodies with strengths and weaknesses that would bind them together in mutual dependence as they fulfilled the creation mandate. The woman's body would allow her to cultivate new image bearers, but this would also make her more vulnerable. The man's body would be unable to bear life, but his physical strength would allow him to protect and provide... The differences between them were not an end in themselves... They were the means by which they would together cultivate the good bounty of the earth and their own bodies. Together they would rule and reign over the new creation as King and Queen.⁹

Of course, all contemporary human cultures are fallen. Gender expressions today may correspond with God's design or they may serve to exaggerate or diminish that design. There will be more on this in coming chapters. But, for now, it's important to see that God gives us our gender so that we can reflect particular aspects of his character in the way we live and relate.

Our kids need for us to celebrate this truth, and they need us to celebrate them. They need for us to celebrate the people God has created them to be as gendered persons. Celebrating our kids will give them confidence in God's design. Like Buzz Lightyear, our kids need confidence in who they are. Over the next two chapters, I'll explore ways you can encourage your kids to confidently trust both the way God has made them to be as well as how he has called them to *live*—all in line with their given gender. Contrary to common expectations, living in accordance with God's design brings freedom rather than bondage. Being a man or woman, being male or female, is a *gift*. And that's something to celebrate!

CHAPTER 2

PREPARE

*Prepare sons and daughters to see their gendered bodies as gifts
God has given them to use in service of his mission.*

Evelyn Bassoff, a psychologist and author of *Between Mothers and Sons*, tells the story of a celebrated bullfighter from Madrid who disappeared one evening during his own victory party. After searching the entire house, one houseguest finally found him in the kitchen, washing dishes. The guest was aghast. He couldn't swallow the idea that a bullfighter—the pinnacle of masculinity in Spanish culture—would be engaging in what he thought of as a woman's work. When he asked the bullfighter what he was doing, the bullfighter looked him in the eye and stated, "Sir, I am a man. Everything I do is masculine."¹⁰

In the last chapter, I wrote about how parents should celebrate their child's given gender and help him or her, like this bullfighter, grow in confidence. Because God made mankind male and female, a person's gender corresponds with his or her biological sex. Gender is, in this sense, fixed. It cannot become whatever we want it to be, because our gender is a part of our personhood. Being a man or a woman is a gift we receive from God.

I wholeheartedly affirm this truth. But while our true gender is fixed, it's important to affirm ways in which gender expression varies from

person to person—even in the Bible. Think, for instance, about the two patriarch brothers, Jacob and Esau. They were both men. But Jacob imaged forth God’s orderly rule in the kitchen: he made a legendary lentil stew! Esau, on the other hand, expressed his masculinity as a hunter (Gen. 25:24–28). Jacob and Esau were different boys, and it’s not just Jacob and Esau. There are a range of ways masculinity and femininity are expressed across relationships and cultures today as well. In Scotland, for instance, a kilt is a cultural expression of masculinity.¹¹ In the States, wearing one might seem more appropriate for a schoolgirl. As I described in the previous chapter, the man and woman in the Genesis 2 narrative, expressed their gender in the context of their relationship. Their gender expression was personal and relational. This is always the case. Gender *always* takes a cultural shape, and it doesn’t emerge identically across all times and cultures.

This is where raising kids can get tricky. What should we teach our children about gender expression? Are there biblical gender norms that are essential to teach our kids? If so, how do we distinguish between what is part of God’s design for gender expression and what has been culturally constructed since the fall?

The Bible never gives us the impression that it’s essential to teach culturally constructed gender stereotypes to children. Phrases such as “Boys don’t cry” or “A woman’s place is in the kitchen” should be eliminated from our vocabulary. We shouldn’t think there are certain traits that will make a boy manlier or a girl more of a woman. Even the term “gender roles” can be unhelpful when it gives the impression that manhood and womanhood, masculinity and femininity are cultural personas or scripts to which children must conform.¹² That’s not the kind of conformity we want our kids to embrace. Instead, parents should call both their daughters and their sons to be *transformed*, that is, to live in conformity with the character of Christ. As kids of both sexes grow in maturity and, if converted, transform into Christ’s likeness, the integration of their body and soul will ensure that they grow to maturity as women and as men.

This doesn't negate sexual difference. Parents are responsible to teach their children, who already have a given gender, the kind of character that's necessary to be a godly brother or sister, wife or husband, mother or father. Boys need to grow up into godly brothers and potential fathers who can provide for and protect others. Girls need to grow up into godly sisters and potential mothers, that is, influential helpers who cultivate the relational structures necessary for nurturing others.

For young men, this means parents should prepare them to live as servant leaders—to work to cultivate good, to fight to protect what's true, and to take initiative:

A boy's gendered body is a gift that enables him to help fulfill the creation mandate and the Great Commission.

- *Work for good.* A man's physical strength allows him to provide for his family. Adam was created with an orientation toward work. Genesis tells us the Lord formed the man from the ground (2:7), and then he placed him in the garden "to work it and take care of it" (2:15). If a husband or father refuses to work and provide for his family, this amounts to denying the faith (1 Thess. 3:10; 1 Tim. 5:8). A lazy man fails to steward the strong body God gave him (Prov. 12:24). He fails to conform his life to Christ, who sacrificed his body for our sake (1 Peter 3:18).

We must teach our sons to cultivate their bodies, minds, and relationships—not for selfish gain, but for the sake of God and others. If a young man doesn't love God, he'll work with the wrong goals in mind (Gen. 4:19–24; 11:1–9). We can teach young men to get a job and start investing early—not so they'll be millionaires by forty but instead to learn the character and skill necessary to serve others and potentially provide for a family. Boys need dads and other older men to model service in church and community. They need to see men working with humility for the sake of justice and mercy (Micah 6:8).

- *Fight to protect.* Finally, our goal should be to raise young men with self-control, who will use their physical and emotional strength to protect others. Some men fail to control their strong emotions and become foolish hotheads (Prov. 14:16–17). Others use their physical strength for violence and abuse (Gen. 4:1–16). Adam neglected his strength. He should have spoken up to protect his wife from the serpent’s lies (Gen. 3:6). But in Adam’s failure, we receive the promise of one who does fight, protect, and who will crush Satan on the final day (Gen. 3:14–15; 1 Cor. 15:25; Rev. 20:10).

We have an opportunity to participate in Christ’s victory when we fight for what is good and true (Rom. 16:19). Throughout the Scripture, we’re given examples of men who use their strength to protect others. Abraham went to war to save Lot. David fought again and again to save Israel. Not all our sons will learn to wrestle or do martial arts, but they can all learn to speak up and fight for what is good.

Perhaps the most important battle we fight is the fight against our own sinful passions. As Paul reminds us in 1 Thessalonians 4:3–6: “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified; that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.” In a world that is rampant with pornography, training our sons to fight the good fight against their own sinful passions is essential.

- *Take initiative.* Think about how God commissioned Adam—before the fall—to live as a servant leader. He names Adam as head and representative of the human family (Rom. 5:15; 1 Cor. 15:22). But ultimately Adam failed (Gen. 3:6). Only Christ truly showed us what it means to serve as head by humbly considering others as greater than himself (Phil. 2:3–8). If we’re going to raise young men to serve as faithful covenant heads of families, we must teach them to serve sacrificially.

When a cup spills at the dinner table, a boy shouldn't wait for mom to grab a paper towel. Teach boys to jump up and move toward the problem with eager humility (Prov. 3:27). This is important. We must show young men that serving others as a brother does mean taking initiative, but it doesn't always require being in charge. Even if our boys enter a headship role as husbands or fathers, they need to learn that these leadership roles require spirit-empowered service (Eph. 5:23; John 13).

Just as we prepare young men to be servant leaders, we should call young women to live in conformity with Christ's character as influential helpers:

A girl's gendered body is also a gift that enables her to help fulfill the creation mandate and the Great Commission.

- *Give help and influence.* When God made the woman for Adam, he created "a helper suitable for him" because it wasn't good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). Through her gendered orientation toward relationships, a woman reflects God's character as *help* and *salvation* for his people (Ps. 33:20, Ps. 70:5; Ex. 18:4). Every woman should be inspired, and every prideful man humbled, to see that each major era of biblical history begins with a woman: Eve—Genesis 3; Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter—Exodus 2; Hannah—1 Samuel 1; Mary and Elizabeth—Luke 1. Notice too that it isn't required to be a mother to have saving influence: Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter didn't give birth to Moses, but God used them to bring deliverance to the Hebrew people (Ex. 2:6).¹³

The woman was made as co-ruler with the man (Gen. 1:26); there's shared authority in that statement. There is strength and dignity in the woman who contributes to both home and society by running the family business and leading in trade (Prov. 31:10–31). But often-times influence accomplishes more than authority ever could—both

for good and evil (Prov. 8–9). Eve didn't need to flex her muscles to influence Adam to eat the fruit; she simply gave it to him. Her actions had destructive power. Teach your daughters that their actions and words have influence (1 Tim. 2:9–10; 1 Peter 3:1–5). Then teach them to ask, “Is what I do and say a help or a hindrance to others? Do I think about how I can help and serve, or do I only consider how I want to be served?”

- *Nurture and empower others.* After the fall, God named the woman Eve, mother of all the living (Gen. 3:20). This was a grace. The man and woman received the wages for sin but not yet fully; the woman's body could still give life. This is a great gift. In raising children, both a man and a woman's nurturing presence are necessary. But a woman's design for nurture is unique. Her body is crafted by God to incubate and sustain a baby's life from conception to birth. Her milk alone can sustain her newborn for the first part of the baby's life.

Not every woman will become a wife or mother, but every one of our daughters can provide life-giving care for others. Paul instructs every woman to display leadership in the church by serving as spiritual mothers (Titus 2:3–5). We see examples of this in Priscilla's ministry to Apollos (Acts 18:26—her name is listed first before her husband!), in Philip's prophet daughters (Acts 21:8), and in Timothy's grandmother Lois (2 Tim. 1:5). Such women model what it means to nurture others in the faith through strong influence as teachers of God's Word.

Now that I have outlined some particular encouragements parents can give to their daughters and sons, please allow me to make a clarification. I'm not saying that men shouldn't contribute to society's relational structures. A father shouldn't be all authority with no nurture.¹⁴ Nor am I saying that women shouldn't provide for and protect their families or communities; consider Deborah the judge (Judg. 4–5)!

Throughout the Scriptures, we see that both sexes are necessary for God's people to fulfill their essential functions in the world. Both sexes are necessary to fulfill both the creation mandate (Gen. 1:28) and the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19–20). Alsop describes it this way:

At the most basic level of human existence, both sexes are necessary for bearing new image-bearers into the world, an incredible, though often downplayed function of these sexes. But whether individuals ever have biological children, the two sexes are integral in bearing and growing spiritual children. The importance of each sex is lost if we dismiss the distinct elements of their giftings or roles given in Scripture for doing the work of discipling the next generation of believers.¹⁵

It's the importance of using these distinct giftings that we have as men and women to disciple coming generations that we need to pass on to our kids. Our goal as parents should be to celebrate our child's biological sex, their true gender, as a gift for ministry and prepare our kids both to receive this gift and to employ it with Christ-like character.

CHAPTER 3

SUPPORT

Support your kids' interests. Don't overreact if they don't fit cultural gender stereotypes.

In a 2014 blog post entitled “Let Kids Be Kids Instead of Sexualized Little Adults,”¹⁶ writer Amy Julia Becker raised concerns about a YouTube video, which tells the story of a child named Ryland. Ryland “transitioned” from female to male at age six. The seven-minute video, which at the time of writing had been viewed more than seven million times,¹⁷ shows a cute little girl with attentive parents talking about herself as a boy. Ryland wants to wear a tie and sees herself as a big brother to her little sister. When her manner and these preferences stay the same for years, her parents decide this is more than a phase. Experts told them that children know their “true gender” by age five. So, the parents begin to support Ryland’s transition to a boy by cutting her hair short, using male pronouns, and supporting her desire to dress in boy clothes.

Ryland’s parents and the experts who advised them made assumptions about Ryland’s adult gender identity. It is true that kids begin to form their gender understanding early, but the process by which this happens is not well understood.¹⁸ Children don’t typically need to be taught purposefully about their gender. They absorb this knowledge from the normal course of family life and their larger social environment. While

a strong sense of gender identity is common by preschool, it can change, like any matter of self-perception, as children move into puberty and then adulthood. Becker relates anecdotes of other children, including her sister, who acted like the opposite sex as a kid but ultimately emerged with typical masculine or feminine traits corresponding with their biological sex. She concludes that “when little girls want to dress and play like boys, when little boys want to dress and play like girls,” it’s too early to know how they’ll identify as adults:

Some of them will go on—in puberty and beyond—to want to change their biological sex. Some of them will go on to identify as gay or lesbian. But many of them—perhaps most of them—will simply grow up into the gender [identity] in accord with their biological sex.¹⁹

Jumping to conclusions about the gender with which a child will identify in the future based on their childhood interests fails to see children as who they are—kids, who still have a lot of growing up to do.²⁰

But simply knowing kids are kids doesn’t keep us from worrying, does it? What if your daughter is into boxing and will have nothing to do with ribbons and dolls? What if your boy cares nothing for sports but instead is interested in fashion and dance? Should you be concerned if your child loses interest in the toys and activities typical for their sex? Should you be worried that your children are on the road to a destabilized gender identity or that they’ll want to transition to the opposite gender?

A certain degree of anxiety about our kids is understandable. A very feminine mom can struggle to relate to her tomboy daughter. And if dad is a man’s man who loves to hunt, it can be hard to accept a sensitive son who prefers the kitchen to the woods. In previous chapters, I explored the biblical view that our masculine or feminine gender identities are not established by our cultural gender expression but are rooted in God’s design. Sadly, our tendency—both within the church and in society at

large—is to connect gender identity to rigid cultural stereotypes instead. We think girls must wear pink and play with dolls while boys wear blue and play sports. Andrew T. Walker thinks this is a particular danger in our day:

Perhaps this is tempting for Christians in this generation, where, for the first time in history, questions of gender identity and a celebration of those seeking to change gender have moved into the mainstream. In our quest to stay true to God's calling, it is possible to play to extreme stereotypes in such a way as to bring confusion... [But a] man who cooks or a woman who likes watching football is not blurring inappropriate gender norms; nor is that any sort of concrete evidence that a person has gender-identity issues.²¹

If we disentangle the biblical perspective on gender from our cultural biases, then we can be set free from these assumptions and fears. Since cultural norms don't make a boy or girl, we can support our child's interests, even those that don't fit gender stereotypes, and at the same time encourage a gender identity that aligns with our child's biological sex.

So, what does it look like to encourage your child to embrace his or her God-given gender without putting too much weight on cultural expectations? Here are a few pointers:

First, affirm your child's biological sex and their corresponding gender identity. Affirm God's creation of your child as a unique person and affirm the gender identity that corresponds with your child's biology. This may be in ways that fit common gender stereotypes. But it may also be in ways that do not—such as encouraging a young man who is interested in music to see a great male musician like Bach as a role model or encouraging a daughter with mathematical skill to look up to an outspoken female engineer.²² Rigid gender norms should be avoided. They may appear to

codify biblical manhood and womanhood, but generally speaking they do more harm than good. A father who feels shame, for example, over a son who wants to pursue drama or nursing, may invalidate his son's legitimate desire to cultivate a real gift and ability simply because it doesn't match with his preconceived idea about what it means to be a man. And if a child fails to live up to such inflexible and extra-biblical standards, this may create a sense of internal distance between the child and his or her gender identity.²³ Biblically speaking, seeing your child affirmed as a man or woman according to the culture's values is not the most important thing. More vital than worldly affirmation is encouraging your son or daughter to grow in confidence as the person God made them to be.

Second, give your child focused attention and appropriate affection.

In his classic book on parenting, *How to Really Love Your Child*, Ross Campbell wrote, "A child is the most needy person in our society, and the greatest need is love."²⁴ Most parents know this intuitively, but they find it a challenge to convey their love in a way their child can receive it. Many parents only touch their children when necessity demands it such as when helping them dress or buckle into their car seats. *This is a travesty.* Children need the emotional encouragement that comes from regular affection. God means for every child to be held, touched, and snuggled. As kids grow, they need wrestling, back-slapping, high fives, and physical contact from sports and games. We can help our sons and daughters grow in confidence by giving them unconditional love, eye contact, focused attention, and physical affection.

Finally, face the obstacles presented by a destabilized gender identity with grace, truth, and hope. Sometimes preferences and desires, like Ryland's in the YouTube video, do persist. Loving parents sometimes watch their child progress from harmless interests to deliberate, regular cross-dressing and a destabilized gender identity. Some parents—even godly, Christian parents—have children who experience discord and inner

conflict between their gender identity and biological sex. Psychologists label this persistent discord as *gender dysphoria*.

We don't understand much about the causes of gender dysphoria, but we do know the experience is real. It might be tempting to label a child's feeling that he or she would feel better as the opposite gender (or no gender at all) simply as an example of wrong thinking or a lack of faith. But when a child experiences distress, anguish, and conflict about their perceived gender identity, this is usually a complex, unchosen experience. People experiencing gender dysphoria feel that their biological body is lying. And, when their experience is severe, they may also experience depression and thoughts of suicide.²⁵

Please don't be dismissive with your child about their experience. Rather, show compassion and speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). Supporting your child by empathizing with their pain does not mean affirming gender dysphoria as natural and normal. And it does not mean supporting a "transition" or a choice to identify as transgender. Parents should be wary of hormonal or surgical treatments that seek to change an individual's body and chemical balance and bring them into alignment with their perceived gender. As Collins writes, "God designed personhood to be constrained and shaped by bodies, and efforts to make permanent, fundamental changes to the body are inherently traumatizing."²⁶

We know that God made men and women to live out our masculine and feminine gender identities with joy and confidence. But in a fallen world, broken bodies, broken family systems, and broken human cultures can conspire against us. In chapter 6, I'll give a series of encouragements for the parents of children who disclose struggles with gender dysphoria or same-sex attraction. But, for now, it's important to say that our love

Gender Dysphoria—a persistent sense of discord and inner conflict between one's gender identity and biological sex.

must not change nor shrink back. Instead, we must respond with grace, truth, and hope.

Even if an experience of gender dysphoria persists for your child's lifetime, God remains faithful. Recall the story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25. Have you considered that God didn't pick the most gender stereotypical son to be the patriarch and namesake for his chosen people? Jacob wasn't even the most obedient and faithful son. Scandalously, God chose the deceptive son who pretended to be someone he wasn't. You see, God always chooses broken people who need him. He meets us in our discord, and he works out his glorious purposes. It may be that your child's battle with his own weakness is a pathway to Christlikeness. As Russell Moore observes, "A cross-shaped masculinity walks not with Esau's swagger but with Jacob's limp."²⁷ God is faithful to broken sinners like Jacob, so we can faithfully love our kids as well, facing whatever obstacles may come with hope.

CHAPTER 4

TEACH

Teach your kids that sex is a good gift, but it's not ultimate.

On a mid-February morning, I sat in a coffee shop across the street from our church building with my oldest daughter, who was then eleven years old. We stopped after a morning prayer service to grab coffee and donuts before the start of her school day. The weeks just before March mark the end of the college basketball season. Where we reside in the state of Kentucky, that's a big deal. So, I wasn't surprised when I got a notification from my sports news app as we sat down.

I pulled out my phone, and she looked over my shoulder. I saw right away this would be a tough conversation. My daughter is a big basketball fan, and her favorite team was about to miss out on a chance to play for the national championship. Not because of play on the court. No, our local college team was involved in a sex scandal—being investigated for hiring escorts for student-athletes.

Suddenly our daddy-daughter date felt dreadful. “Babe, I don't want to talk about this here,” I whispered, “Maybe we can discuss it as we drive to school.”

Then to my surprise, she offered, “Oh, I think I heard about this.”

“What did you hear?” I asked and moved out of the shop.

“Well, my friend told me that the coaches hired girls for all the

basketball players.”

“Do you know what that means?” I asked.

Her face turned a little pink. “It means the coaches paid girls to have sex with the boys on the team,” she answered.

She knew. Her words hung in the cold air. What should I say next?

I don’t know any parents who think talking with their kids about sex is easy. Most are overwhelmed—or in denial. Author Jessica Thompson describes our concerns:

We are afraid that we might awaken some desire in them that wasn’t there before. We are afraid that they will be curious if we are too descriptive. We are afraid they will be curious if we are not descriptive enough. We are overwhelmed with the goal of preserving their purity. [And] our own past experiences cause shame or fear.²⁸

In an overly sexualized world, it’s easy to fear conversations like the one I had with my daughter. The culture we live in plays into our anxiety. Both outside the church and within, we elevate sex. We put it on a pedestal and make it into something more than God intended it to be. We make it the ultimate thing, the thing that makes us lovable and fully human; or unlovable and less than human.²⁹ Often, when we’re forced to talk about sex with our kids, our sexual brokenness lurks in the shadows, mocking our attempts to pass along truth with clarity. Thankfully, the gospel answers our weaknesses and gives us confidence to speak: Sex is a good gift, but it’s not the ultimate gift. Sexual sin does have consequences, but our children’s spiritual future doesn’t rise or fall with their sexual purity. God did not design sex as the primary way of forming our identity. That place of ultimate importance belongs only to Jesus.

So, here’s a few ways to keep the good news about Jesus central when you’re talking with your kids about sex:

Because sex and marriage are good gifts, it's completely appropriate for our kids to desire a spouse and anticipate the joy of physical intimacy. Moms and dads don't need to hide the fact they enjoy their spouse's physical affection. You need not fear you're awakening lustful desires by modeling attentive marital love. In fact, one of the best apologetics for a Christian vision of marriage is a loving and healthy one. We can share information, but seeing a deep, fun, and loving friendship modeled is a path toward capturing our kids' imagination for the rest of their lives.

Third, warn your kids not to forfeit freedom by being promiscuous.

As they grow, we must teach our kids that their virginity is a gift and as far as it depends on them, they should save it for their future spouse. We should tell them about the risks of having sex outside of marriage and the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases. But we shouldn't make these things the sole motivation for practicing abstinence. Instead, as our kids enter the dating years, we need to help them see the freedom that's forfeited when they give in to promiscuity. Outside of marriage, sex is always about performance and proving yourself. You have to impress and entice.

Warn your pre-teen and teenager about how this sell-yourself mindset objectifies our bodies and results in using others for temporary pleasure. Paul tells us that failure to control sexual urges always results in taking advantage of a fellow image bearer (1 Thess. 4:6). State it plainly for your sons and daughters. If a young man asks a girl to give him her body before he's willing to give her his life in marriage, that's manipulation. Real love is the self-giving love of Christ (John 15:13), not premarital sex. Make clear that reserving sex for marriage is for their good. The Bible is clear that any form of sexual immorality, any sexual activity outside of marriage, is sin before God (Eph. 5:3; 1 Thess. 4:3). Only within the covenant union, where our commitments have already been made, are we safe to be vulnerable and experience the free gift of intimacy without thinking love must be earned.

Fourth, be honest about sexual brokenness. Parents and church leaders feel anxiety about maintaining kids' purity. Shame over our own sexual brokenness and fear of the consequences of our kids' potential mistakes can lead us to obsess over this area of their lives. But if we think our kids have innate purity for us to maintain, we've forgotten what the Bible teaches us about sin. Our kids are already broken. To think we can guard them from all of the world's impurity so that they won't have any sexual problems when they're older is a fool's errand.

Even in Bible times, God's people struggled with sex (1 Cor. 7:3–5). We shouldn't expect it to be any different for us or our kids. We all experience brokenness because we all battle a selfish, sinful nature. We must be honest and courageous enough to put our worst foot forward. Be open and realistic about how sin affects—or will affect—everyone's sex life. You don't need to glorify your sin, but you also shouldn't be afraid to tell your kids how you've struggled. Modeling confession will encourage your children to be honest when they have sins to confess, and it will give you a relational foundation from which you can fight sin together (1 John 1:6–7).

Finally, and most importantly, don't elevate sex. Instead, give your children Jesus. My generation of American church youth participated in *True Love Waits* rallies and purity Bible studies. Even though it wasn't explicitly taught, we got the impression that if we kept our pants on, saved ourselves for marriage, and never kissed until the pronouncement we'd experience marital bliss. But the trouble is sex can't carry that much weight.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher writes about his grand search for meaning in life. He searched for significance in work, in material treasure, in aesthetic beauty, and in sexual relationships. He says, "I acquired... a harem as well—the delights of a man's heart" (2:8). If the writer of this text was King Solomon, then he's employing quite the understatement. According to 1 Kings 11:3, he amassed seven hundred wives and three

hundred concubines. “I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure,” the Teacher writes (2:10a). But was this enough to satisfy his deepest longings? No, he concludes, “Everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (2:11).³²

God did not design sex as a way of meeting our deepest spiritual needs. He designed sex to be an expression of a loving marital relationship (Gen. 2:24–25). And he designed marriage as a signpost that points to something more, the deep love and mystical union between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:31–32). When a married couple experiences the joy of sexual intimacy, God wants them to be reminded of the greater joy they’ll one day experience when they’re united to their bridegroom, Christ, in glory.

The truth is that God may call your child to a life of sustained singleness and celibacy. There’s a long tradition of Christians who have made life-long vows to remain single and celibate in order to live out their commitment to Christ (Matt. 19:12). Today, we’re most familiar with this tradition as it’s expressed by nuns and priests in the Roman Catholic Church. But even in our Southern Baptist circles, you probably know individuals who haven’t made a lifelong vow to remain single but who nevertheless make a dedicated choice to remain celibate in service to Christ for as long as they are. The apostle Paul describes the freedom such individuals have to serve the Lord as desirable and good; it’s the kind of life circumstance that may be preferable for the sake of ministry (1 Cor. 7:1, 8).³³

So, rather than holding out a great sex life as the great hope and moral motivation for our kids, we must instead hold out Christ for them. Teach your teens that while sex may give temporary satisfaction, our great hope is found in God. His love is better than life (Ps. 63:3). An orgasm gives pleasure for the moment, but God’s love and presence brings eternal joy. Teach your kids to look up and cling to the Savior who loved them even in the midst of their weakness and sin (Rom. 5:8). As Thompson says:

Tell them that believers in him have his record of being the only sexually pure one to ever walk this earth. Teach them about the free grace of forgiveness that he extends to everyone. Teach them how much his love is better than any sexual experience they will ever have. Open their eyes to the beauty of the Lover of their soul.³⁴

And as you remind your kids about the good news of God's love, believe it for yourself. Show them a life lived in his love with confidence that Jesus is the only solution to our brokenness and the only pathway toward purity.

CHAPTER 5

WARN

*Warn your kids against discontentment,
excuse-making, and sin's empty promises.*

Rob was heading off to college, and he planned to room with a high school friend, Jack. But one phone call threatened those plans. As Rob drove home from youth group one Wednesday evening, his phone began to vibrate. He looked down to see that it was Jack, and he immediately thought that was odd. Jack sent regular texts, but he wasn't much for long conversations. So, as soon as Rob pulled into the driveway, he called his friend back. The voice on the other end of the line shook. Jack had called to confess he'd been hanging with a number of gay friends. He was struggling with same-sex attraction and even same-sex sexual intimacy. He'd called Rob out of respect. Jack wanted Rob to know before they roomed together.

Rob had grown up in a conservative family and community. For that matter, he'd grown up in a conservative part of the country. Jack's voice shook for a good reason; he knew this was a risk. Frankly, the confession shocked Rob. Repulsed, he took a posture of judgment. Rob was polite on the phone, but he didn't go on to room with Jack. When the two young men got to school, Rob avoided his struggling friend. The sad irony of that reaction was that Rob's lust and sexual sin was equally

disordered. His pattern of desire was different, which somehow made his sin seem more excusable, but his depravity was no less.

The Bible tells us that we are all sinners (Rom. 3:23). Fornication, adultery, homosexual behavior (same-sex sexual and romantic intimacy), and—more to the point of this book—active transgender expressions such as cross-dressing and gender re-assignment are all sinful results of the fall (Matt. 15:19, 1 Cor. 6:9–19). God calls all Christians to repent from such actions by turning away from them in the power of the Holy Spirit. Homosexual lust, sometimes called same-sex attraction, and gender identity confusion are disordered desires, and they are also a result of the fall (James 1:13–15). God calls Christians to repent from evil desires by walking in confession (1 John 1:9) even though such desires may persist throughout a believer's life.³⁵

The short epistle of Jude warns against those who excuse all such immorality. Jude is a loving, spiritual father. He wants what is best for each member of God's church. He begins his letter with regret, saying that he'd wanted to write and encourage the beloved with good news about their shared salvation. But instead, he felt compelled to warn them to fight against false teaching (Jude 3). As parents, we must be willing to speak to our children in the same way. Even when it's awkward or difficult, our kids need warnings and encouragement to stand against the world's lies.

Jude 4 summarizes the heart of his warning:

For certain individuals, whose condemnation was written about long ago, have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.

We must see what Jude is *not* saying here. He's not condemning everyone who has disordered desires—or who commits sexual sin—to hell.

In fact, Jude's letter ends with hope for those entangled with lust (Jude 22–23). Instead, Jude rebukes those who excuse sin and justify themselves, just as Rob did with his potential roommate. False teaching and immorality aren't just *out there* in the world. Jude says they're inside the church. Sin is a disease that's inside each one of us.

Jude warns against three types of false voices. Let's look at each one and put ourselves under the microscope. Do we see these tendencies in ourselves or our kids? If so, we must heed Jude's warnings and fight for our kids' faith by speaking his words of warning to them as well.

First, beware of discontentment. When we're discontent, we fail to believe that what God has given us is enough. Contentment is not circumstantial. It's theological. Any time we give in to sexual immorality or a desire to define our identity on our own apart from God's design, we're demonstrating a lack of happiness and satisfaction in God. Our desires are out of order, that is to say, our strong affections for self, sex, or power are stronger than our affections for God and his ways. It does not matter whether lustful desires are heterosexual or homosexual in nature, choosing to follow strong, competing sinful tendencies demonstrates our failure to delight first in God.

Allowing a discontented heart to reign within us without confessing this as sin is dangerous. God rescued Israel from slavery and oppression in Egypt. They were given a great salvation, but they grumbled and complained in the desert. As a result, a whole generation died in the wilderness (Jude 5). Whether it's the fallen angels or the perverse people of Sodom (Jude 6–7), Jude shows us a pattern: discontent leads to destruction.

From an early age, kids need to work through the disappointment of not getting what they want. When a child can't have another piece of chocolate before bed, it's an opportunity for them to learn that their parent knows best. Help your kids learn to find satisfaction in what they've already received. And model for your kids what it looks like to bring your

wants and desires to the Lord in prayer (Matt. 7:7–12). Don't be afraid to pray with them for good desires you know you might not get. Then show them what it looks like to choose satisfaction in God's answers and obedience to him whatever comes. The secret of contentment lies in depending on Christ for strength even when we are weak (Phil. 4:12–13).

Second, stop making excuses. Jude's opponents claim they don't have to obey God's law, because, according to Jewish custom, it was mediated by angels (Acts 7:53; Heb. 2:2)³⁶ and not given directly by God himself. Jude sees this argument for what it is: an excuse (Jude 8). God's Word is clear. They just don't want to obey it.

We still make excuses today. The Bible is plain. Same-sex sexual lust and intimacy is sinful (Rom. 1:26–27; 1 Cor. 6:9–10; 1 Tim. 1:9–10). However, some say this is harsh and would openly affirm same-sex sexual relationships even while they claim to follow the Scriptures. When reading a clear verse like Leviticus 18:22, "Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable," they make excuses: "Old Testament law doesn't apply today. It came from Moses, not Jesus." But that is the same tune Jude's opponents played.³⁷

Help your kids see the world's excuse-making for what it is. And more importantly, help them see when they are tempted to excuse their own sin. When we make excuses, we attempt to lessen the blame or guilt we're due for our immoral behavior and desires. Rob, in my story above, may have known from youth group what the Bible taught about homosexuality. The trouble was he'd excused his own lusts.

I can still remember when I first confessed my own struggles with lust to a friend in seminary. He asked me, "Have you practiced regular confession?" And he quoted 1 John 1:7 to me: "If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." I thought to myself, "Does God *really* mean that?" All the excuses rolled through my head. My pathway to repentance was to admit my guilt and submit to God's authority.

Still, I have regrets. There have been times when my own hypocrisy has crippled efforts to genuinely care for others. Nate Collins describes how this is a common problem in the church:

Many gay people sense a double standard when Christian leaders routinely (and loudly) denounce same-gender sex while quietly ignoring morally lax attitudes toward other areas of sexual ethics. In an era when pornography and serial monogamy are both common occurrences, some gay people... feel hurt, misunderstood, and judged when Christian leaders harp instead on the evils of the “gay agenda.”³⁸

We must stop having a different standard for others than we do for ourselves. Only awareness and honesty about our own sin will empower us to speak the truth with credibility to our gay, lesbian, and transgender neighbors.

Finally, beware of sin's empty promises. Jude says the false teachers came in like a thundercloud but never brought rain... like a dead, hollow tree that never bore fruit... like a wandering star, no use for navigation (Jude 13). Here's the thing about sin: it talks a good game, and it can be fun in the moment, but the promises are empty.

Our culture glamorizes relational happiness. Young girls grow up on Disney love stories, believing marriage is a fairy tale of unending personal intimacy. Young men fantasize about an indulgent honeymoon. As parents, we want relational joy for our kids too. We all want the glory of fulfillment and love. If fulfillment is the goal, it can be tempting for families to accept their child's gender transition or their desire to pursue a romantic same-sex relationship without any qualification. Some parents feel that if they don't affirm their child's desires and support a same-sex partnership or gender transition, they'll be robbing their child of a life of joy.

But true wholeness isn't found in temporal relationships. It's found in Christ. In the final chapter, I will address some ways to love and care for a child who experiences the discord of gender confusion or same-sex attraction. For now, it's important to simply say what Christ doesn't promise. He doesn't guarantee that besetting conditions will be resolved simply because of faith. Rather, living as a Christian in a broken world sometimes means persistently battling with desires that are contrary to God's plan. But we do not do so without hope of reward or final healing (Luke 18:29–30). Jude tells us the way broken people must fight the good fight of faith: "Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life" (Jude 21). We remember God's love and wait on Jesus. On the last day, we'll see that he is better than what we long for here.

CHAPTER 6

CARE

Show Christ-like empathy toward kids who persistently struggle.

Sandra grew up in a Christian home. She was a good girl in church—read the Bible, prayed, did her quiet time. She was homeschooled by solid parents. She never snuck out or did anything crazy. She'd never even been to a high school prom. On the outside, it looked like Sandra had a sheltered and safe Christian childhood, but on the inside, there was a lot more going on.

During her freshman year of college, Sandra met June, a girl who quickly became her best friend. They spent hours each day together, and, over time, their worlds began to revolve around each other. Their emotional closeness became co-dependent and inappropriately physical. One day it happened, and they freaked out. They cried and prayed and asked God to help nothing like that happen again. But it did. And Sandra and June never told anyone. They even promised one another they'd never tell their future husbands.

A kid like Sandra should feel safe confessing her sins to Christian parents and her church community. But there's understandable shame for a kid confessing same-sex attraction or transgender feelings, especially if that child has grown up around coarse gay jokes or politically charged opinions about the LGBTQ movement. It's understandable for a kid who

grows up in that context to fear losing friendships if they allow their struggles to become public knowledge.

What can a parent or a church leader do in the face of such shame? What does it look like to show love and compassion for a child who experiences the discord of gender confusion or same-sex attraction?

First, cultivate empathy. If we're honest, we know kids' fears about confessing disordered desires are not unfounded. Many parents don't react well. Some parents' first instincts are to run from the situation and ignore it. Some become overwhelmed emotionally and get angry, whether with God or with their child: "How can this be happening? You were raised better than this!" These kinds of responses only create more distance between parents and their children. Like the Pharisees, many Christian communities teach true doctrine all the while judging and marginalizing those who publicly confess sin or adopt socially unacceptable identities (Luke 18:9–14). We must remember that those who experience gender confusion or same-sex attraction are not unique in battling brokenness or sinful desires. Cooper Pinson asks:

Can you relate to a student who wants to follow Christ, but finds strong, competing, sinful tendencies within himself that moves him in destructive directions?³⁹

If so, you're more like your child than you may have originally thought. When we acknowledge what we have in common and move *toward* kids who struggle rather than away from them, we reflect the kind of love with which Jesus loved us (1 John 4:19).

Second, acknowledge the courage it took to be honest.⁴⁰ Even if your child's confession is hard to hear, thank them for being honest enough to tell you the truth. Acknowledge how hard it must have been for your child to speak this secret and get it out in the open. Thank them for

trusting you, reaffirm your love for them, and assure them that your relationship will not end because of this confession. Affirming your love for your child and expressing gratitude for their truthfulness will help you cultivate an ongoing relationship that is built on authenticity.

Third, listen before you speak or act. If your child began the conversation, respect their initiative by allowing the dialogue to be about what you can learn from them and not what you feel they need to hear from you. When seeking to understand, the most important thing is to ask comfortable open-ended questions.⁴¹ If your child says, “I’m gay,” “lesbian,” or “I want to transition,” for instance, it’s important to understand what they mean by that. Ask your child how they came to this self-understanding, how long they have been considering this, how certain they feel it is true, and why. Ask whether or not your child is content with this expressed identity, or if this is something they don’t want. Don’t assume your child or their friends understand these terms in the same way you do. It may be that your child is confessing a sinful experiment with a new gender identity or same-sex sexual intimacy in the same way a cheating husband who wants to turn away from unfaithfulness confesses, “I’m an adulterer.” When a Christian owns his or her identity as a sinner in this way, it should never be discouraged (1 Tim. 1:15). Your child is most likely describing an ongoing battle in which they feel oppressed and helpless. As Tim Geiger observes, “He might really be saying, ‘I’ve been struggling with these feelings for years, and the only reasonable conclusion I can draw is that I must be gay.’”⁴²

Fourth, validate your child’s suffering. Kids who struggle with gender confusion or same-sex attraction may have heard many times from the church that homosexuality is wrong. But rarely have we acknowledged their unique form of suffering and intense temptations. Students who experience same-sex attraction “often contend with intense loneliness, confusion, fear, and even despair as they wrestle with something that

seems as if it's an essential part of who they are."⁴³ The same is true for kids who experience gender dysphoria.

Having disordered desires, whether these desires consist in same-sex sexual lust or gender confusion, is not the same thing as *giving in* to these sinful desires, that is, dwelling on those desires and acting upon them. Both are sinful, but the kind of repentance required and the kind of change we can expect is different. We must turn from all sinful behavior, but disordered desires—while they should be resisted, confessed, and put to death—may nevertheless remain throughout our lives. Sharing your own struggles—how you do not feel at home or comfortable in your own body, or, as appropriate, your own ongoing battles with lust and temptation—will demonstrate that brokenness and sexual sin is not unique to your child.

Fifth, pray for your child. We can educate our children as much as we want, have conversations, and teach them the biblical point of view. But in the end, their hearts must be in submission to God or these words will fall on deaf ears. A child's repentance ultimately depends on the Holy Spirit's work in their heart and not on a parent's actions. Some things only come out by prayer (Mark 9:29). So, as parents, we must appeal to God to act on behalf of our children. In the introduction, I told a story about Pastor John and his friend Rodney whose daughter declared her desire to identify as a boy. Rodney may be in for a long journey with his daughter. Sometimes it seems that we do and say all the right things as parents, but our hearts break because our children continue to choose the wrong path. In these times, one of the best ways to care for our children is to advocate for them while on our knees.

Finally, gently communicate what it looks like to follow Jesus. By adopting an empathetic posture and listening carefully, you set the stage for speaking redemptive truth. If your child is determined to pursue an intimate same-gender, sexual relationship or transition their gender,

there may be no way of avoiding defensiveness on their part. Remember that it's God's kindness that leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). Your child needs kindness too. It's doubtful that arguments will convince your child their perspective is wrong. But if they are open to dialogue, share sensitively a biblical and compassionate perspective on suffering with sexual brokenness. We can encourage a child who experiences besetting and persistent trials with the truth that all Christians are called to suffer. As Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will find it" (Matt. 16:24-25).

Following Christ while enduring gender dysphoria or same-sex attraction will involve taking up crosses. It will mean rejecting impulses that run counter to God's created design. It may mean that your child remains single and celibate into adulthood or resists temptation while their psychological distress increases. You should never gloss over or minimize these hard realities, but you can remind your children that they have a high priest who can sympathize with them in their weaknesses (Heb. 4:15). As Andrew Walker observes, "No one ever experienced greater dysphoria than the perfect Son of God being treated as a sinner."⁴⁴ "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (1 Pet. 2:24).

As you encourage your child to persevere, keep in mind that this most likely will be a long journey. Change is slow. A girl like Sandra, whose story I told above, may gain confidence to confess her sins and grow both to live a life in obedience to the Bible's commands and even to disciple others who experience same-sex attraction. But that same girl may still struggle to discern whether or not missing one of her girlfriends who is out of town is just a normal part of friendship or evidence that she's still battling a sinful pull toward co-dependence. As Chris Torchia writes:

We all appreciate the success stories of someone coming to

Christ and experiencing complete freedom from ingrained sin patterns, but God doesn't always work that way. A more accurate picture of repentance is a gradual process of turning away from sin and turning to God more and more, usually with many bumps along the way.⁴⁵

Parents, you should find the kind of support network that will stick with you through the long haul. Don't hide your weakness from your Christian friends. And don't be afraid to reach out for help from your pastors and biblical counselors like those at Harvest USA (www.harvestusa.org).

We can be confident that Christ is ready, willing, and waiting to meet us even where brokenness seems profound and irreparable. We can persevere with faith, knowing that we share in Christ's sufferings so we may also share in his glory (Rom. 8:17). For those who do not shrink back, God has prepared a great reward. We do not belong to those who shrink back to destruction but to those who persevere and are saved (Heb. 10:36-39).

KEEP THE CONVERSATIONS GOING

This book is a plea for frequent family conversations. Kids need to hear the truth of their biblically defined gender identity, warnings against the world's lies, and testimonies about the gospel's power to transform sinful sexuality and heal transgendered brokenness. They need to hear it again and again. For this to happen, it's important for you to build the kind of relationships with your kids where you can talk about anything together. Ask about your children's thoughts and feelings on any and every subject. Help them sort out their thoughts and follow up later about what they've expressed. In particular, make conversations about sexuality as normal and regular as anything else your family converses about.

To that end, I've prepared the following questions/conversation starters for families with kids at various developmental stages:

PRESCHOOL (AGES 2-5)

- Why do you think God made both girls and boys?
- What do you like about being a girl? Or being a boy?

ELEMENTARY (AGES 6-10)

- What are the character qualities that make someone a godly woman or man?

- Do you have any friends who have two moms or two dads?
- Have you heard the word “transgender”? Do you think a boy can really turn into a girl?
- Have you heard the words “gay,” “lesbian,” “homosexual,” “bi-sexual”? Where did you hear those words? Do you understand what they mean?

JUNIOR HIGH / HIGH SCHOOL (AGES 11-18)

- What are the character qualities that you think you should look for in a future husband? Or future wife?
- Why do you think Jesus remained single? What does that teach us about what’s most important in our future?
- Do you have any friends who identify as gay or transgender? When a friend says, “I’m trans,” or “I’m gay,” what do they mean by that? How does that impact the way they see their identity? How does it impact the way you see their identity?

NOTES

¹“Why are so many teenage girls appearing in gender clinics?”

The Economist (September 1, 2018), accessed online at <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2018/09/01/why-are-so-many-teenage-girls-appearing-in-gender-clinics>.

²Definitions adapted from Andrew T. Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say About Gender Identity?* (The Good Book Company, 2017), 167, 170.

³Martin Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation (1518)” in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy J. Lull, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 42.

⁴See Nate Collins, *All but Invisible: Exploring Identity Questions at the Intersection of Faith, Gender, and Sexuality*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 208.

⁵I agree with Marty Machowski when he writes, “Just as the fundamental created elements of the earth are fixed, so is our biological sex. But the fall has also affected our chromosomes. Because of the fall, a very small percentage of people are born with genetic disorders [such as Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, Klinefelter Syndrome, or Turner Syndrome]. Some of those disorders would affect a person’s sexual characteristics. It is important to show kindness and compassion to those who have these

genetic disorders” in *God Made Boys and Girls: Helping Children Understand the Gift of Gender*, (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2019), 30.

⁶ Cf. Justin Holcomb, “9 Ways to Protect Your Children from Sexual Abuse” (Aug. 8, 2015), accessed online at <http://justinholcomb.com/2015/08/11/9-ways-to-protect-your-children-from-sexual-abuse/>.

⁷ Collins, *All but Invisible*, 212.

⁸ Bylaws of Sojourn Church Midtown (Louisville, KY). Adopted December 2018.

⁹ Hannah Anderson and Wendy Alsup, “Toward a Better Reading: Reflections on the Permanent Changes to the Text of Genesis 3:16 in the ESV Part 3” *Practical Theology for Women* (Sept. 30, 2016). Accessed online at <http://theologyforwomen.org/2016/09/toward-better-reading-reflections-permanent-changes-text-genesis-316-esv-part-3.html/>.

¹⁰ Evelyn S. Bassoff, *Between Mothers and Sons: The Making of Vital and Loving Men*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 18. Cited in Collins, *All but Invisible*, 218.

¹¹ Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate*, 31–32.

¹² Russell Moore, “Gender Roles,” Video posted July 2, 2019. Accessed online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmeTPNLHw18/>.

¹³ Wording adapted from Daniel Montgomery, “Gender Questions, Week 3: Women and Femininity,” a sermon at Sojourn Community Church in Louisville, KY (Dec. 16, 2007).

¹⁴ Moore, “Gender Roles.”

¹⁵ Wendy Alsup, "Equal but Different: A Complementarian View of the Sexes" in *Cultural Engagement: A Crash Course in Contemporary Issues*, ed. Joshua D. Chatraw and Karen Swallow Prior, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 107–108.

¹⁶ Amy Julia Becker, "Let Kids Be Kids Instead of Sexualized Little Adults", *Thin Places* (July 10, 2014), accessed online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/amyjuliabecker/2014/july/let-kids-be-kids-instead-of-sexualized-little-adults.html/>.

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAHCqnux2fk>

¹⁸ Douglas Davies, *Child Development: A Practitioner's Guide*, Third Edition, (New York: Guilford Press, 2011), 296-298; Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate*, 167; Stan and Brenna Jones, *How and When to Tell Your Kids About Sex: A Lifelong Approach to Shaping Your Child's Sexual Character*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993, 2007), 104.

¹⁹ Becker, "Let Kids Be Kids."

²⁰ According to the American Psychological Association's guidelines, "Research suggests that between 12% and 50% of children diagnosed with gender dysphoria may persist in their identification with a gender different than sex assigned at birth into late adolescence and young adulthood." See "Psychological Practice with Transgender and Nonconforming People," *American Psychologist* (December 2015), 841–842. Even if these estimates are low (and there is some evidence that they may be), gender confusion in childhood is hardly determinative.

²¹ Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate*, 55–56.

²² Stan and Brenna Jones, *How and When to Tell Your Kids About Sex: A Lifelong*

Approach to Shaping Your Child's Sexual Character, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993, 2007), 109.

²³ Collins, *All but Invisible*, 218–19.

²⁴ D. Ross Campbell, *How to Really Love Your Child*, (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1977, 2015), 14.

²⁵ Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate*, 33.

²⁶ Collins, *All but Invisible*, 220. Also see Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate*, 33–35.

²⁷ Russell Moore, *The Storm-Tossed Family: How the Cross Reshapes the Home*, (Nashville: B&H Books, 2018), 82.

²⁸ Jessica Thompson, “How to Talk to Your Kids About Sex,” *Gospel Taboo* (Aug. 6, 2015). Accessed online at <http://gospeltaboo.com/home/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-sex>.

²⁹ See Joel Fitzpatrick and Jessica Thompson, *Mom, Dad... What's Sex? Giving Your Kids a Gospel-Centered View of Sex and Our Culture*, (Eugene: Harvest House, 2018), 63ff.

³⁰ Titles include Stan and Brenna Jones, *The Story of Me*, Book 1 for Ages 3–5, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007); Carolyn Nystrom, *Before I Was Born*, Book 2 for Ages 5–8, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007); Stan and Brenna Jones, *What's the Big Deal? Why God Cares about Sex*, Book 3 for Ages 8–11, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007); and Stan and Brenna Jones, *Facing the Facts: The Truth About Sex and You*, Book 4 for Ages 11–14, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007).

³¹ William P. Smith, *How to Talk to Your Kids about Sex: Honesty and Openness for a Sensitive Subject*, (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2011), 4.

³² Thompson and Fitzpatrick elaborate on this point in chapter 3 of *Mom, Dad... What's Sex?*

³³ See Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader: How transforming your inner life will deeply transform your church, team, and the world*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 87.

³⁴ Thompson, "How to Talk to Your Kids About Sex."

³⁵ See the excellent explanation of this reality in statements 4 and 5 of the "Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality to the Forty-Eighth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America," <https://pcaga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/AIC-Report-to-48th-GA-5-28-20-1.pdf>.

³⁶ See other Jewish sources in Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary, (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 58.

³⁷ Kevin DeYoung carefully reviews arguments like these and gives careful biblical responses in his book *What Does the Bible Really Teach About Homosexuality?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015).

³⁸ Collins, *All but Invisible*, 9.

³⁹ Cooper Pinson, *Helping Students with Same-Sex Attraction: Guidance for Parents and Youth Leaders*, (Greensboro: New Growth, 2017), 8.

⁴⁰ Adapted from Tim Geiger, *Your Child Says, "I'm Gay,"* (Greensboro: New Growth, 2013), 8–9.

⁴¹ Brian Hambrick, “Talking to My Boys after the Transgender Talk at Their Public School” (May 16, 2016), accessed online at <http://bradhambrick.com/talking-to-my-boys-after-the-transgender-talk-at-their-public-school/>.

⁴² Geiger, *Your Child Says, “I’m Gay,”* 21.

⁴³ Pinson, *Helping Students with Same-Sex Attraction*, 14.

⁴⁴ Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate*, 89.

⁴⁵ Chris Torchia, “Coming Out as Gay or Transgender: Five things parents must do—part 4,” *The Student Outreach*, (Sept. 21, 2017), accessed online at <https://harvestusa.org/coming-out-as-gay-or-transgender-five-things-4/>.



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