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One in the Spirit:  
An Exploration of and Movement Toward the Theology Behind Acceptance of, Affirmation of,  
and Advocacy for Transgender People in the Church

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## INTRODUCTION

In the Fall of 2020, Calvin University's Student Senate conducted a survey of the student body.<sup>1</sup> One of the questions this survey asked was "Do you identify as a member of the LGBTQ+<sup>2</sup> community?" Of the 782 students who responded, 7.03% of those students affirmed they were part of this community, with 89.77% responding negatively and 3.20% selecting "[p]refer not to answer."

In February 2021, Gallup<sup>3</sup> published findings that "0.6% [of United States adults identify] as transgender," with "5.6% of U.S. adults identifying as LGBT" in total.<sup>4</sup> Calvin's percentage of LGBT students is even higher than that estimate. As such, it is reasonable to expect that the number of transgender students could be higher by 1.43% as well,<sup>5</sup> meaning that 0.6085% of students are possibly transgender. Calvin's 2020-2021 student body profile says that there were 3,307 students in attendance.<sup>6</sup> Taking 0.6085% of that population gives the estimate that there could have been around 20 transgender students at Calvin last academic year.<sup>7</sup>

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1. "Student Survey Summary", SurveyMonkey.Com, Last modified 2020, <https://www.surveymonkey.com/stories/SM-CTQHNMJY/>.

2. Throughout this paper, the terms "LGBTQ+" and "LGBT" will be used. "LGBTQ+" stands for "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Plus" and "LGBT" stands for "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender." The terms are not identical; however, they can be used interchangeably in most contexts.

3. According to the "About Us" page, Gallup is a self-described "global analytics and advice firm" ("Pressing Problems Solved", Gallup.Com, Last modified 2021, <https://www.gallup.com/corporate/212381/who-we-are.aspx>.)

4. Jeffrey M. Jones, "LGBT Identification Rises To 5.6% In Latest U.S. Estimate", Gallup.Com, Last modified 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/329708/lgbt-identification-rises-latest-estimate.aspx>.

5. Whether or not this assumption is reasonable is debatable; it is possible that students who are transgender would choose not to come to Calvin for a variety of reasons.

6. "Key Facts", Calvin.edu, Last modified 2021, <https://calvin.edu/about/key-facts/>.

7. Thank you to Josiah Ryan for helping me with this math.

This number is mathematically sound, but if someone were to walk around campus, it is unlikely they would encounter that many “out” (open about their status) transgender students. It is more probable that there are fewer transgender students at Calvin even if we factor in those who are not out to others or even themselves yet. However, just because the transgender student population is significantly smaller on our campus than the average population of the United States that is transgender does not mean that this is an issue Calvin does not need to talk about. In fact, recently, the Christian Reformed Church created a Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality, which released a report in October 2020 discussing, in part, the presence of gender dysphoria among church attendees and suggesting ways to handle the complexities of gender dysphoria.<sup>8</sup> With *Time* magazine having written about “The Transgender Tipping Point” in 2014,<sup>9</sup> it is clear that this issue is not going away; rather, it is only going to become more pressing as time passes. How to love our transgender neighbors is an issue the Church must reckon with in the immediate future. A study by Helana Darwin<sup>10</sup> of Stony Brook University concluded that “most [nonbinary people] who were raised within the socially dominant Christian religion have ceased to identify with the Christian community and/or religion;”<sup>11</sup> it is likely that this religious antipathy is the case with the transgender population at

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8. "Report Of The Committee To Articulate A Foundation-Laying Biblical Theology Of Human Sexuality", Crcna.org, Last modified 2020, [https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/human\\_sexuality\\_report\\_2021.pdf](https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/human_sexuality_report_2021.pdf).

9. Katy Steinmetz, "The Transgender Tipping Point", *Time*, Last modified 2014, <https://time.com/135480/transgender-tipping-point/>.

10. Darwin was a student at Stony Brook University when writing this (Helana Darwin, "Navigating The Religious Gender Binary", *Sociology Of Religion* 81, no. 2 (2021): 185-205, doi:10.1093/socrel/srz034.)

11. Helana Darwin, "Navigating The Religious Gender Binary", *Sociology Of Religion* 81, no. 2 (2021): 185-205, doi:10.1093/socrel/srz034.

large. Mark Yarhouse<sup>12</sup> pants out that “[w]hat most people who [experience gender dysphoria] find in the [C]hurch is rejection and shame.<sup>13</sup> If the Church does not want this trend of perceived exclusion to continue, action must be taken to make the Church a hospitable place for transgender individuals.

This paper was written to explore and suggest movement towards adopting the theology behind transgender acceptance, affirmation, and advocacy within the Church at large. While many churches and denominations have different perspectives on what can be called “the transgender debate” (whether transgender people should identify with their biological sex or their gender identity, and, if the latter, whether or not they should transition), accepting, affirming, and advocating theologies already exist across many denominations, even if not formally.<sup>14</sup>

## DEFINITIONS

Before diving into the theological arguments of this paper, it is important to define the terms of the conversation. There are, after all, many ideas about gender swirling around in society. Some people say gender is a biological concept equivalent to biological sex. Others spout the phrase “Sex is between your legs; gender is between your ears,” implying gender is some sort of mental trait. Still others think gender is a social construct put in place to oppress a

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12. Yarhouse is a Christian psychologist and the Hughes Chair of Christian Thought in Mental Health Practice at Regent University (Mark A Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015.)

<sup>13</sup> Mark A Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> For example, “In 2018, the 223rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) voted to affirm its commitment to the full welcome, acceptance, and inclusion of transgender people, people who identify as gender non-binary, and people of all gender identities within the full life of the church and the world” (“Stances Of Faiths On LGBTQ Issues: Presbyterian Church (USA)”, HRC, accessed 14 December 2021, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/stances-of-faiths-on-lgbt-issues-presbyterian-church-usa>.)

certain class of people. In order to have a coherent conversation, there must be an agreement about the language being used.

In the context of this paper, “gender” refers to a combination of social, cultural, and psychological traits typically associated with maleness or femaleness. It is a psychosocial-cultural concept that includes physical characteristics of biological sex assigned at birth (ASAB<sup>15</sup>), gender roles, individual psychological traits that we categorize into masculinity and femininity, gender identity, and gender expression. “Gender identity” more specifically refers to a person’s personal awareness of their own gender, the relationships between all the pieces that make up the concept of gender as applicable to them, and the significance of those relationships. A person whose assigned sex at birth and gender identity match is called “cisgender,” while a person whose assigned sex at birth and gender identity do not match is called “transgender.” The transgender umbrella includes a vast array of identities, but the most common ones are “transgender woman” (someone assigned male at birth whose gender identity is woman), “transgender man” (someone assigned female at birth whose gender identity is man), and “nonbinary” (someone who, regardless of assigned sex at birth, does not identify as a man or a woman, in part or in whole, some or all of the time). According to the American Psychological Association, “gender dysphoria” is “psychological distress that results from an incongruence between one's sex assigned at birth and one's gender identity.”<sup>16</sup> Finally, “transitioning” is the process by which someone takes steps to make their external presentation and way of relating to

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15. Most people use “AGAB” and the variants “AMAB” — “Assigned Male at Birth” — or “AFAB” — “Assigned Female at Birth.” However, male and female are sexes, not genders, and are categories used to describe clusters of physical traits, not an individual’s gender as a whole, so ASAB seems more appropriate than AGAB.

16. Jack Turban, “What Is Gender Dysphoria?”, American Psychiatric Association, Last modified 2020, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gender-dysphoria/what-is-gender-dysphoria>.

the world on the basis of gender congruent with their gender identity, typically to alleviate gender dysphoria.

## **TRANSGENDER ACCEPTANCE**

Genesis 2:18 says, “It is not good for the man to be alone.”<sup>17</sup> Though this refers specifically to when Adam was in the Garden of Eden before Eve was made, the themes of community and the importance of relationships run strongly through the Bible. The fact is that humans were made to be connected to each other.

Sometimes, people do not have the luxury of participating in community with their family of origin. Regardless, everyone creates new communities throughout their life. Kinships based on social agreements outside of consanguinity or affinity (blood relations or marriage) are called fictive kinships, and they function like families. LGBT individuals often form kinship networks with each other. These connections are often life-giving and provide vital support for individuals, especially transgender ones, who have faced exclusion from traditional kinship relationships.<sup>18</sup>

The Church is another type of fictive kinship. Its members are not always related to each other, but are considered to be a family in the Triune God. Extending the Church’s fictive kinship to include transgender individuals who want to be a part of the Church is not only good optics, but it is also an extension of the Great Commission<sup>19</sup> and, therefore, what Christians are called to

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17. New Revised Standard Version New York: Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, 1989. Genesis 2:18

18. Z Nicolazzo, *Trans\* In College: Transgender Students’ Strategies For Navigating Campus Life And The Institutional Politics Of Inclusion* Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2016.

19. Matthew 28:19-20

do.<sup>20</sup> (Additionally, as not all transgender people are out, some transgender people are already part of the Church's fictive kinship in a hidden capacity, and, as some churches are already accepting of transgender individuals, some other transgender people are a part of the Church's fictive kinship in an open manner.)

Furthermore, the Bible tells us that we are all made in the *Imago Dei*, the Image of God.<sup>21</sup> The Bible does not say that everyone except transgender individuals is made in the Image of God; rather, every single person is. This is the basis for the Christian Reformed Church accepting LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) people as fellow believers and members of the denomination's congregations. The denomination's website page on homosexuality says the following:

Persons of same-sex attraction may not be denied community acceptance solely because of their sexual orientation and should be wholeheartedly received by the church and given loving support and encouragement. [...] Opportunities to serve within the offices and the life of the congregation should be afforded to same-sex oriented Christians as well as to heterosexual Christians.<sup>22</sup>

As such,<sup>23</sup> the only logically consistent response to transgender individuals is one of full, unbridled acceptance.

Accepting transgender individuals should be the least controversial of the three points (acceptance, affirmation, and advocacy). However, social identity theory explains that people

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20. Mark A Yarhouse and Julia Sadusky, *Emerging Gender Identities: Understanding The Diverse Experiences Of Today's Youth*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020.

21. Genesis 1:27

22. "Homosexuality", Christian Reformed Church, accessed 14 December 2021, <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/position-statements/homosexuality>.

23. There is still debate outside of the Christian Reformed Church as to whether LGB people ought to be accepted in the Church, but the CRC has come to a consensus and discussion on the acceptance of same-sex attracted people is outside of the scope of this paper.

tend to define themselves in in-groups and out-groups.<sup>24</sup> It is easy for a predominantly cisgender institution like the Church to systematically function in a way that excludes people who are different (in this case, transgender) based on unintentional bias and so-called norms. It is something all humans are guilty of doing in many areas of difference. As such, it is necessary to explicitly state that transgender people ought to be openly welcomed into the Church.

### **TRANSGENDER AFFIRMATION**

Arguing for accepting transgender people in our churches is one thing. However, what should congregations do when a transgender person wants to come out or consciously take steps to transition? How can they be expected to navigate such a complicated arena of theology? Is it not the case that transgender individuals are a relatively new phenomenon and, as such, there is little historical precedent for how to best support them?

This is actually not the case. Stephen Whittle<sup>25</sup> has written about transgender history, and he points out that the first documented surgery performed on a transgender individual for the express purpose of transitioning was a double mastectomy performed on a transgender man (often called “top surgery” today) by Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld in 1926<sup>26</sup>. Additionally, the first recorded gender confirmation surgery (then called sex reassignment surgery) was performed on a woman in 1930.<sup>27</sup> There may have been similar surgeries earlier. After all, as Mark Yarhouse and

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24. Saul Mcleod, "Social Identity Theory", Simply Psychology, Last modified 2019, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/social-identity-theory.html>.

25. Whittle is a self-described “European Equalities & Trans Activist” who has conducted “30 [years of] research on trans lives” in the context of his work as a “human rights lawyer” (Stephen Whittle, "Stephen Whittle", Twitter, accessed 14 December 2021, <https://twitter.com/stephenwhittle>).

26. Stephen Whittle, “A Brief History Of Transgender Issues”, The Guardian, Last modified 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/jun/02/brief-history-transgender-issues>.

27. Horatia Harrod, "The Tragic True Story Behind The Danish Girl", The Telegraph, Last modified 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2016/04/14/the-tragic-true-story-behind-the-danish-girl/>.

Julia Sadusky<sup>28</sup> point out, “a subset of people is often recognized as diverging from sex and gender norms, and this reality appears to be reflected in a variety of cultural contexts throughout history.”<sup>29</sup> Transgender people, and the concept of transitioning, are not actually new phenomena.

From a sociological perspective, it makes tremendous sense that transgender individuals exist and experience their genders in ways that differ from how cisgender people experience their genders, no matter what age they come out at. Anne Fausto-Sterling writes about the concept of brain plasticity, suggesting that our brains can grow and change as long as we are alive. Though they change less frequently as we age, it is perfectly reasonable to expect that transgender individuals may come to understand themselves more fully as they age.<sup>30</sup> Fausto-Sterling writes about the complexity of discerning what is a gender-related trait and what is a trait related to some other factor, saying our physiological plasticity is like a series of Russian nesting dolls. It is impossible to see a cross-section and be able to tell what behaviors are caused by what part of our socialization; all that can be known is that there are multiple factors that could contribute. As such, we may not understand why transgender individuals undergo the experiences they do, but the existence of these experiences make biological and sociological sense and ought to be both acknowledged and respected. Transgender people are the best authority on their own lived experiences, as certainly outsiders cannot discern what is a gender-related trait and what is caused by something else.

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28. Julia Sadusky is “an author, speaker, and licensed psychologist” (Julia Sadusky, "About", Julia Sadusky, Psy.D., Last modified 2021, <https://www.juliasadusky.com/about>).

29. Mark A Yarhouse and Julia Sadusky, *Emerging Gender Identities: Understanding The Diverse Experiences Of Today's Youth*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020.

30. Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing The Body: Gender Politics And The Construction Of Sexuality* New York: Basic Books, 2008.

Transgender people, regardless of what makes them transgender, are at an increased risk for suicidal ideation and behavior. A report from the Williams Institute<sup>31</sup> states that 40.4% of transgender individuals have attempted suicide at some point in their lifetime. However, the same report states that “Access to gender-affirming medical care is associated with a lower prevalence of suicide thoughts and attempts.”<sup>32</sup>

Yarhouse describes four ways of addressing apparent gender dysphoria in children, and reports that mental health professionals, as a collective, tend to support children who are possibly transgender in discovering and living into their identities, whether it turns out they are transgender or cisgender.<sup>33</sup> Even if a parent does not necessarily want their child to be transgender, supporting their child, as seen above, is more likely to save their child’s life. It is also the case that most mental health professionals advocate for transition among adolescents and adults. (However, it must be noted that what an individual’s transition may look like is a personal decision and no two transitions even between two of the same kind of transgender individuals, are the same. Steps towards transition must be taken only as dictated in each specific scenario instead of prescribed with a broad brush.)

This decision that transitioning is perhaps the lesser of two evils (with the other evil being allowing a transgender individual to remain dysphoric and forcing them to live as their inauthentic self) can be theologically justified through the concept of *pikuach nefesh*. *Pikuach*

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31. The Williams Institute self-describes as “the leading research center on sexual orientation and gender identity law and public policy [created to] ensure that facts — not stereotypes — inform laws, policies, and judicial decisions that affect the LGBT community” (“Who We Are”, The Williams Institute, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/about/who-we-are/>).

32. “Suicide Thoughts and Attempts Among Transgender Adults,” The Williams Institute, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/suicidality-transgender-adults/>

33. Mark A Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015.

*nefesh* (which literally translates to “watching over a soul”) is the idea that, save for three laws (the laws prohibiting idolatry, murder, and adultery), any Jewish law may be broken in the name of the preservation of life. (For example, a Jew may eat non-kosher food if it is the only food available to them and they will starve to death otherwise.) This includes an individual’s own life.<sup>34</sup>

*Pikuach nefesh*, it appears, would dictate that, if there was a Jewish law that forbade transgender people from transitioning, the clear indicators that transitioning prevents suicide in transgender individuals would override that prohibition. The only exceptions to this would be if transitioning constituted idolatry, murder, or adultery, and there seems to be no indication that it does so. As such, Judaism — at least in theory — supports affirming transgender individuals in their identity and transitions.

*Pikuach nefesh* is not an expressly Christian concept. However, it seems likely that when Jesus heals in the Gospels on the Sabbath, he is invoking the concept. None of the activities he performs are even expressly life-saving; many of them are merely life-enriching. It would not be a stretch to see the concept of *pikuach nefesh* applied in Christian circles.

Is there a difference between allowing a transgender person to transition and affirming that transition? Such a distinction could be drawn in theory, but in practice, transgender people are either supported or discouraged in their transitions by their communities. This ties back to the concept of fictive kinships. If the Church wants to be a place that welcomes transgender individuals fully, it must be a place that affirms transgender people in their identities. A study

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34. R Eisenberg, A Kolatch and G Wigoder, Jewish Concepts: Pikuach Nefesh, Jewish Virtual Library, accessed 14 December 2021, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/pikuach-nefesh>.

conducted by the Trevor Project<sup>35</sup> reports that “transgender and nonbinary youth who report having their pronouns respected by all or most of the people in their lives attempted suicide at half the rate of those who did not have their pronouns respected.”<sup>36</sup> This is not simply about transgender people accepting themselves, or finding a community that accepts them on the condition that they do not transition. This statistic confirms that the people in a transgender individual’s life have a responsibility, according to the principle of *pikuach nefesh*, to affirm the transition of the individual.

*Pikuach nefesh* is not the only argument for affirming transgender individuals. Yarhouse and Sadusky present a worldview that says “[t]ransgender [...] identities reflect variations of gender experiences that should neither be condemned nor viewed as ‘less than.’ Rather, gender diverse experiences should be celebrated by society.”<sup>37</sup> While they ultimately do not endorse this view, other theologians do. Austen Hartke<sup>38</sup> has written a book discussing many different theologies that affirm transgender people. One of these theologies has to do with the text of Genesis 1. Genesis 1 tells the creation story as a series of merisms, or contrasting parts that represent the whole.<sup>39</sup> For example, evening and morning represent the whole collection of times

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35. The Trevor Project self-describes as “the world’s largest suicide prevention and crisis intervention organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) young people” (“The Trevor Project | For Young LGBTQ Lives”, The Trevor Project, accessed 14 December 2021, <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/explore>),

36. “National Survey On LGBTQ Youth Mental Health 2020”, The Trevor Project, Last modified 2020, <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020/?section=Supporting-Transgender-Nonbinary-Youth>.

37. Mark A Yarhouse and Julia Sadusky, *Emerging Gender Identities: Understanding The Diverse Experiences Of Today’s Youth*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020.

38. Austen Hartke is a transgender man and a graduate of Luther Seminary (Austen Hartke, “Austen Hartke: Theology, Identity, Education”, Austen Hartke, Last modified 2021, <http://austenhartke.com/>).

39. Richard Whitekettle, “The Mechanics Of The Psalms: Parallelism.”, Lecture, Calvin University, 2021.

seen during the day, including dawn and dusk, despite the two times not being mentioned explicitly. Hartke writes,

“it’s not surprising to find humans broken into two groups [in Genesis 1:27]: male and female God created them. But this verse does not discredit other sexes or genders, any more than the verse about the separation of day from night rejects the existence of dawn and dusk.”<sup>40</sup>

Hartke further advocates for permitting transgender people to dress according to their gender identity, supporting transgender individuals in changing their name to one that resonates with them and expresses their gender in a clearer fashion, and allowing transgender individuals to alter their bodies (physically transition) in ways that affirm their identities., all grounded in Biblical exegesis.<sup>41</sup>

This book is not the only place where Hartke writes about these forms of affirmation. Together with Myles Markham,<sup>42</sup> Hartke wrote a piece for the Human Rights Campaign (an organization dedicated to advancing LGBT equality in the United States and globally) that was edited by Michael Vazquez.<sup>43</sup> Hartke and Markham address Deuteronomy 22:5, which says that “[a] woman must not wear men’s clothing, nor a man wear women’s clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this.”<sup>44</sup> The Bible contains between seven and ten verses, depending on how they are translated and interpreted, known as “clobber verses.” These verses

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40. Austen Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible And The Lives Of Transgender Christians* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Myles Markham is a Christian educator with a Master of Arts in Practical Theology from Columbia Theological Seminary (Austen Hartke and Myles Markham, "What Does The Bible Say About Transgender People?", Human Rights Coalition, accessed 16 December 2021, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/what-does-the-bible-say-about-transgender-people>).

43. *Ibid.*

44. Deuteronomy 22:5

have historically been used to delegitimize LGBT identities. The Christian Reformed Church does not interpret these verses, as discussed earlier, to do so, but they do believe that these verses speak against same-sex sexual activity. However, Deuteronomy 22:5 may be the only verse that speaks to issues related to gender presentation, which is the closest the Bible gets to addressing questions of gender identity. When addressing this verse, Hartke and Markham argue that Christians are not bound by the Old Testament laws, and claim that, even if we were, a transgender man wearing men's clothes would not, in fact, be breaking the law, as he is a man.<sup>45</sup>

Hartke and Markham further discuss the issue of allowing transgender people to pick their own names, citing Scripture where individuals have their name changed and change the name by which they call God. They argue that “[the] stories [they highlight] demonstrate that name change[s] can be about proclaiming who one is to become, recognizing and confirming who one has always been or some combination of the two.” With such a precedent, they argue, it is perfectly acceptable for transgender individuals to change their names to ones that align better with their lived reality — in fact, in some cases, these names can be gifts from God.<sup>46</sup>

Other theologians also advocate for transgender affirmation on different grounds. Margaret Mowczko<sup>47</sup> encourages Christians to read Genesis 2 in a different fashion than usually performed. She advocates for a reading of the Genesis 2 creation narrative that preaches the creation of *Adamah*, or *ha-’adham*, a gender-neutral human made of the dust. She argues that

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45. Austen Hartke and Myles Markham, "What Does The Bible Say About Transgender People?", Human Rights Coalition, accessed 16 December 2021, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/what-does-the-bible-say-about-transgender-people>

46. Ibid.

47. Margaret Mowczko received her Bachelor's of Theology from the Australian College of Ministries and her Masters of Arts “with a specialization in early Christianity and Jewish Studies” from Macquarie University (Margaret Mowczko, "About", Margaret Mowczko, accessed 16 December 2021, <https://margmowczko.com/about/>).

Eve (*Ishshah*, woman) is made from *Adamah*, and the remnants are made into man (*Ish*), but first, there was *Adamah*.<sup>48</sup> It is important to acknowledge that, according to this reading, the first human we encounter in the Bible — before the Fall, when everything was good — exists outside of the gender binary. As such, it should not be a stretch to imagine that people who exist outside of the conventional cisgender framework exist today.

Further, the precedent for theology that affirms transgender individuals is not new. Stephanie Roy<sup>49</sup> references Robert Song<sup>50</sup>, who argues that Thomas Aquinas, a very influential Medieval Church Father, would support the surgical modification of non-injured body parts under his Principle of Totality. This principle states that “[a]n individual may not dispose of his organs or destroy their capacity to function, except to the extent that this is necessary for the general well-being of the whole body. Destroying an organ or interfering with its capacity to function prevents the organ from achieving its natural purpose”<sup>51</sup> but is acceptable if it serves a greater good for the body as a whole. Song points out that Aquinas allowed “the destruction of diseased body parts for the treatment of chronic pain and health of the overall body,” despite these being non-life-threatening conditions. Song argues that this is a basis for casting Aquinas as a supporter of altering healthy body parts in patients who have Body Integrity Identity

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48. Margaret Mowczko, "The Human (Ha'Adam), Man (Ish), And Woman (Ishshah) In Genesis 2", Margaret Mowczko, Last modified 2013, <http://margmowczko.com/human-man-woman-genesis-2/>.

49. Stephanie Roy wrote this text while a student at Loyola Marymount University (Roy, Stephanie. "Christian Bioethical Approaches To Gender Reassignment Surgery: Understanding Opposition And Retrieving The Body-Soul Complex". *Say Something Theological: The Student Journal Of Theological Studies* 2, no. 2 (2020). <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/saysomethingtheological/vol2/iss2/5>).

50. Robert Song is a professor of theology and religion at Durham University (“Staff Profile: Professor Robert Song, M.A., D.Phil. (Oxon)”, Durham University, <https://www.dur.ac.uk/directory/profile/?id=672>).

51. "Thomas Aquinas' Principles Of Double Effect And Totality", Thomas Aquinas' Principles Of Double Effect And Totality, accessed 16 December 2021, <http://www.pages.drexel.edu/~cp28/docdb/ble.htm>.

Disorder, and Roy extends that argument to include altering healthy body parts to aid those who struggle with gender dysphoria.<sup>52</sup>

Beyond affirming transgender individuals as equal members of the Church, some people believe they bring unique gifts to the table. Mary Elise Lowe<sup>53</sup> argues that transgender individuals bring four distinct gifts to the Church by virtue of their identity and presence. Lowe claims that transgender individuals

celebrate that humans are God's created co-creators, and that God creates with and through them. Second, gender non-conforming Christians have learned to steadfastly love (hesed) themselves as they love God and the world. Next, transgender Christians witness that humans are a coherent unity of body-mind, not a mind in a body. Finally, transgender followers of Jesus welcome the Holy Spirit's gifts of plurality, newness, unity, and freedom.

These gifts are vital, Lowe further argues, to the flourishing of the Church.<sup>54</sup>

Transgender people, as discussed in the section on acceptance, ought to have a seat at the table of the Church by virtue of their existence as humans. The Church ought to affirm their identities and transitions as well, as argued in this section, and validate them as heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, as we are all identified in Romans 8:17.<sup>55</sup> Finally, the Church ought to celebrate the unique gifts that transgender individuals bring to the community by the very virtue of their trans identities.

## TRANSGENDER ADVOCACY

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52. Stephanie Roy, "Christian Bioethical Approaches To Gender Reassignment Surgery: Understanding Opposition And Retrieving The Body-Soul Complex", *Say Something Theological: The Student Journal Of Theological Studies* 2, no. 2 (2020), <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/saysomethingtheological/vol2/iss2/5>.

53. Mary Elise Lowe is Associate Professor of Religion at Augsburg College (Mary Elise Lowe, "From The Same Spirit: Receiving The Theological Gifts Of Transgender Christians", *Dialog* 56, no. 1 (2017): 28-37, doi:10.1111/dial.12293).

54. Ibid.

55. Romans 8:17

It is abundantly clear that transgender people must be accepted into and by the Church. It also is true that transgender people ought to be affirmed in their identities and transitions by the Church. Where does that leave the Church, though? If acceptance and affirmation are integral to how the Church relates with transgender individuals and the transgender community at large, then advocacy must be a natural extension. Advocacy for transgender people follows Jesus' mandate to care for the marginalized. Jesus frequently discusses caring for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Transgender people often face homelessness, being abandoned or excluded from their families. They sometimes are, in effect, orphaned. Transgender people also are often viewed as strangers by Christians, as many Christians do not know transgender individuals (or at least ones who are out).

The National Center for Transgender Equality reports that “more than one in ten [transgender individuals] have been evicted from their homes” and “one in five transgender individuals have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives.”<sup>56</sup> These rates are significantly higher than the national averages, which state that “[a]pproximately 17 people per 10,000 experience homelessness each day.”<sup>57</sup> Transgender individuals thus experience homelessness at a rate over 117 times as frequently as the average population in the United States. They are clearly in desperate need of care. Furthermore, in 2016, *The New York Times* published an article stating that LGBT people are more likely to be the victims of hate crimes than any other marginalized group.<sup>58</sup> Transgender individuals are most at risk of facing these hate

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56. "Housing & Homelessness", Issues, <https://transequality.org/issues/housing-homelessness>.

57. Smiljanic Stasha, "The State Of Homelessness In The US -- 2021", Policy Advice, accessed 16 December 2021, <https://policyadvice.net/insurance/insights/homelessness-statistics/>.

58. Iaryna Mykhyalyshyn and Haeyoun Park, "L.G.B.T. People Are More Likely To Be Targets Of Hate Crimes Than Any Other Minority Group", Last modified 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/16/us/hate-crimes-againstlgbt.html?>

crimes. It is abundantly clear that transgender individuals need the Church's support instead of any antagonism it may offer at present.

The parable of the Good Samaritan<sup>59</sup> is an often-cited passage used to argue that Christians ought to care for those in need. It is easy to read the passage in a way that suggests, even if the previous arguments for acceptance, affirmation, and advocacy were not present, the Church ought to care for transgender individuals. It is clear from the above statistics that caring for transgender individuals includes accepting, affirming, and advocating for them.

### **PERSONAL ANECDOTE**

This paper has contained many statistics and references to academic works. They are important, but it is difficult to paint a full picture without personal anecdotes. As such, I would like to talk about my own experiences of being transgender in the Church. I am nonbinary (as may be recalled, this means I am neither fully a man nor fully a woman all of the time — for me, it means I am something completely removed from being a man or a woman). I struggled for a long time with very intense gender dysphoria that caused many mental health issues in my life. I was chronically depressed and suicidal while living in a body that did not feel like my own. I certainly could not focus on serving God to the best of my ability while struggling with such issues.

I underwent top surgery (a double mastectomy performed for reasons related to gender identity as opposed to reasons related to cancer) on May 27th, 2021. I had spoken to many people, including a former chaplain here at Calvin, about whether pursuing transition was honoring to God. I was afraid I would not be treating my body as a temple, as I Corinthians

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59. Luke 10:25-37

6:19-20 commands.<sup>60</sup> The chaplain I spoke to suggested that, by removing the source of my gender dysphoria, I would be able to better serve God as I could put more energy towards glorifying and obeying Him and enjoying His presence.<sup>61</sup> If I could connect with God better (and my therapist and psychiatrist recommended this course of action to better my mental health), why would I not pursue transition?

I did so, and my world irrevocably changed forever. I was no longer suicidal and depressed. I was able to revel in my body, celebrating the goodness of God's creation. I have been able to focus on my relationship with God and to participate in the advancement of His Kingdom in a way I could not manage before.

I am only one person, but my story matters. In Matthew 7, Jesus says that “[y]ou will know them by their fruits”.<sup>62</sup> Though Jesus is talking about discerning true prophets from false ones, this could also easily apply to theology. We will know what theology is good doctrine by the fruit it bears. Accepting, affirming, and advocating for transgender individuals bears good fruit. As such, I believe wholeheartedly that the Church should implement these tenets into how it navigates relationships with transgender individuals.

## **CONCLUSION**

Transgender people have a well-established history, showing up in different ways in many cultures across centuries. That being said, the issues of acceptance, affirmation, and advocacy are only being addressed within the Church contemporarily. A crossroads is emerging out of the distance in terms of what theology will be espoused regarding transgender individuals,

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60. I Corinthians 6:19-20

61. Matthew Postma, personal conversation, 2021

62. Matthew 7:16

and individual churches must decide how to engage with the transgender individuals in their care.

Through analysis of statistics, academic sources, and individual personal experience, this paper has featured the most compelling arguments for the acceptance of, affirmation of, and advocacy for transgender individuals. It is important to acknowledge that this paper does not cover opposing arguments; doing so is outside the scope of this work and would require significantly more space than is given. The arguments I have presented do not paint a full picture of the conversation surrounding transgender individuals and the Church, but they contribute greatly to a side that I believe has been underdeveloped and under-discussed. This paper also does not address the questions of why people are transgender; I believe that conversation is better left to scientists and is also not relevant to how the Church ought to treat transgender individuals. After all, as Yarhouse says, “[t]he experience of gender dysphoria[...] is not chosen, nor is it a sign of willful disobedience, personal sin[,] or the sin of the parents.”<sup>63</sup> Whether it is nature, nurture, a combination of the two, or something else entirely that causes people to be or become transgender, the point is not how a person becomes transgender, but rather how the church will relate to someone who is transgender.

Despite the statistics stated previously — particularly the ones centered around rates of suicide — and the analysis of academic sources, along with my own personal anecdote, some people may still be wondering why this conversation is necessary. Why should the Church trouble itself with questions of gender identity when there are bigger issues to wrestle with, like discussion of effective ways to preach the Gospel? It is because our bodies matter. Throughout

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63. Mark A Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015.

the New Testament, there are plenty of references to a bodily resurrection that will occur. What will the bodies of transgender Christians look like in the New Heaven and New Earth? No one knows for sure, but perhaps I Corinthians 13:12 can give some guidance. The passage says, “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall fully know, even as I am fully known.”<sup>64</sup> This passage is likely describing what knowing God will be like, but I think the part about ourselves being fully known is compelling. If the arguments in this paper are sound and Christians ought to accept, affirm, and advocate for transgender individuals because doing so allows transgender individuals to live authentically (and I truly believe this is the case), then transgender people’s gender identity shall be fully known in the New Heaven and New Earth.

It is my earnest prayer that these arguments sway the conversation and help the Church move in a direction of support for and not antagonism towards transgender individuals. I fully believe that Christ calls us transgender individuals to be a part of his Kingdom in the same way he calls cisgender individuals to join him. I would hate to see the Church continue to be a stumbling block for transgender individuals seeking a relationship with Christ; I would much prefer to see it welcome us with open arms that are accepting of, affirming of, and advocating for us.

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64. I Corinthians 13:12

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