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# REFLECTIONS



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# Sexual Identity: A Reflection

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## Introduction

There is a growing ideology that gender identity is not determined by biological sex (i.e., features of the body) but rather by one's internal sense of being male, female, both, or something in between.<sup>1</sup> For those who subscribe to such ideology, one is not born with gender but with a gendered feeling; therefore, it is not appropriate to use the general binary labels, male/female or man/woman, based on bodily features. Individuals are thus encouraged to follow their internal sense of gender, choose their gender labels, and express their sexuality based on those labels. Some express this internal sense of gender through behavior, dress, or speech; others undergo sex-reassignment surgeries to reshape their bodies to align with their self-perceived gender identity. *LGBTQIA+* is acronymic to this ideology that delinks gender identity from sexual identity. It becomes immediately apparent that this ideology does not consider God as the creator of sexual/gender identity. In this brief reflection,<sup>2</sup> I will trace the history of gender theory, discuss what I call *hard* and *soft* elements of human identity, and consider the biblical perspective on the subject.

## A Brief History of Gender Theory

The terms “sex” and “gender” had been used synonymously since 1474, though “gender” later came to be reserved for grammatical categories (i.e., masculine, feminine, neuter). In 1945, Madison Bently considered gender as “the socialized obverse of sex,” the “qualifying terms being ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine.’”<sup>3</sup> In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir claimed that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.”<sup>4</sup> And in 1955, John Money pioneered the distinction between sex and gender. He introduced such terms as “gender orientation” (in place of sexual preference) and “gender role,” which he defined as “all those things that a person says or does

to disclose himself or herself as having the status of boy or man, girl or woman, respectively.” For him, “gender” is malleable within the first two years of life and that during this period, the genitalia of an intersex (hermaphrodite) infant could be normalized surgically. He also claimed that males raised as girls from a young age would grow up to be attracted to males, and live as heterosexual women.<sup>5</sup> Then, in 1968, Robert Stoller concluded that *sex* is a biological category while *gender* is a social category, introducing the popular term “gender identity.”<sup>6</sup>

But the redefinition of sexuality was especially influenced by the second and third waves of feminism in the 1960–1980s and 1990–2000s respectively. Influential voices included persons such as Germaine Greer, who argued, “It is an essential part of our conceptual apparatus that the sexes are a polarity, and a dichotomy in nature. Actually, that is quite false.”<sup>7</sup> So was Judith Butler, who thought, “‘Female’ no longer appears to be a stable notion, its meaning is as troubled and unfixd as ‘woman,’ . . . both terms gain their troubled significations only as relational terms.”<sup>8</sup> These waves challenged women's societal roles and emphasized social equality for women.

Together, laboratory studies, the civil rights movement, and the second and third waves of feminism inspired the social movement for LGBT advocating for equal rights and influencing policy. Francis Kuriakose and Deepa Kylasam Iyer summarize,

The process of consolidating the needs and demands of sexual and gender minorities began with the homophile movement of the 1950s in the United States. Inspired by the civil rights movement and second wave of feminism, the social movement for gay liberation brought a wide range of sexual and gender minorities under the umbrella of LGBT in the 1960s. . . . The gay liberation movement brought visibility and a semblance of solidarity through the gay pride march, and consolidated the seemingly diverse and disparate sexual and gender minorities. The social movement for gay liberation was the foundation for GLS [gay and lesbian studies] that emerged in the area of sexuality studies.<sup>9</sup>

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Ultimately, gender theories emphasize the “self” as an autonomous entity lodged in the inner recesses of the “body.” This thinking that a human *has* a body derives from the Neoplatonic view of the soul within the body and contradicts the basic fact that a human *is* a body.<sup>10</sup>

## Human Identity

Logically, if there is a “self” apart from the body (as some Christians consider it), that “self” cannot have a physical identity and, therefore, cannot have a sexual identity. But if there is no “self” apart from the body, then bodily features must determine one’s sexual identity and expression so that it is not possible to disconnect sexual identity from gender identity. If I am certain that I am a man trapped in a female body, then I am certain that I am a male, only that I *feel* like a woman. We will address the issue of feeling below.

Fundamentally, there are two inseparable aspects of human identity. I have chosen to describe these aspects as **hard identity** and **soft identity**. On the one hand, hard identity comprises the biological structure or physical aspects of a person. Race, ethnicity, and color are elements of a *hard* identity. These elements of *hard* identity are a given and unchangeable. Soft identity, on the other hand, comprises the behavior, beliefs, or practices of a person or people group. Location, nationality, and religion are elements of a *soft* identity. *Soft* identity is like software; it can be installed, deleted, and reinstalled. In other words, a *soft* identity is acquirable. I, a black African, cannot become a Caucasian and still retain my sanity, but I can become a citizen of the USA.

The distinction between the *soft* and the *hard* aspects of human identity is present in Scripture. Human beings share one basic *hard* identity—the *image* of God, created *male* and *female*. Scripture never condemns elements of *hard* identity in their natural state. So, for example, it recognizes persons of all races, ethnicities, and tribes as creatures of God whom, like Israel, God seeks to redeem (e.g., Gen 12:3; Amos 9:7; Rev 14:6). This is why, even in the Pentateuch, foreigners could live in Israel and worship Yahweh under one law (Exod 12:49; Num 15:16, 29). Scripture rather condemns persons based on their personal choices (i.e., elements of *soft* identity). So, for example, while God does not wish that anyone should perish (2 Pet 3:9), it is only those who choose to believe in Christ who will not perish (John 3:16).

Biblically, sexual identity is a *hard* identity as it is determined by biological or (innately) physical structure and appearance of a person rather than by behavior, beliefs, feelings, practices, or location. A person’s sexual identity determines how he/she expresses sexuality. However, sexual expression is itself an element of *soft* identity because it can be influenced by beliefs and

practices (e.g., celibacy, fornication, homosexuality), is expected to occur within acceptable boundaries (e.g., within a monogamous marriage), and there are punitive actions against wrongful sexual expression (e.g., rape and incest). Scripture invites humans to a certain *soft* identity (i.e. Christlike character). And it condemns ungodly elements of *soft* identity (Rom 1:18–32). So, for example, an Israelite who practiced homosexuality was to be stoned to death (Lev 20:13). Even the slightest attempt at blurring one’s *hard* identity in the form of transvestism is expressly prohibited (Deut 22:5). It is not in the power of humans to change elements of their *hard* identity. Although procedures like vasectomy and tubectomy can affect the reproductive system, they do not affect sexual identity. But even these are matters of conscience to be decided by couples.

## Biblical Perspective

### Sexuality and Sexual Identity

The creation account provides us with the foundational basis for sexual differentiation (Gen 1:26–28; 2:18–25). God created the “human” as male and female. Adam was *formed* as male and Eve was *built* as female. Adam is described as a man and Eve, as a woman. So, sexual differentiation is an act of God. Not only is sexuality an integral part of our personhood but it is also integral to our relationships. If male-female describes physical distinctions, man-woman describes the function and type of relationship between male and female in the expression of their sexuality—*husband* and *wife*. God’s joining of Adam (male/man) and Eve (female/woman) as husband and wife served as the pattern for all subsequent marriages. The Hebrew phrase *‘ezer kenegdo* literally means “a help(er) like opposite him.” In its context, this phrase brings together the notions of gender distinction, equality, complementarity, and communion. God intentionally built Eve as Adam’s “opposite.” But He did not just create a male and a female and leave them to decide what to do with their genders. He designed humans for the communion of *male* with *female*, *husband* with *wife*, and through that union, fulfill certain responsibilities (e.g., to be fruitful and multiply). Subsequently, following the divine pattern, children are born “male” or “female” (Lev 12:2–7), “son” or “daughter” (Gen 5:4; Hos 1:6; Luke 1:57).<sup>11</sup> Thus, sexuality is defined in several dimensions including the *physical/anatomical* (“male” and “female”), *functional* (“man” and “woman”), *emotional* (“leave” and “cleave”), *relational* (“cleave” and “know”), *social* (“father and mother”; community), and *spiritual* (God joins man and woman).

The biblical description is clear that sexual identity is exclusively binary (male and female) and defined by physical features (the Hebrew *zakar* “male” and *neqebah*

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“female” can represent the male and the female external sexual organs). Biblically, sex and gender are inextricably linked—if we really need to differentiate the two. One’s gender corresponds to one’s anatomical features; gender identity and role are determined by biological sex. Being a male (*zakar*) makes one a man (*‘ish*), and being a female (*neqebah*) makes one a woman (*‘ishah*). If married, a male person functions as a husband, and a female person functions as a wife. In that relationship, among other things, one *gives* a seed, and the other *bears* it (Gen 4:1).

Sexual or gender identity is a *given*, not *acquired*. It is ontological, not an existential choice. It is God-made, not a biological accident. Scripture consistently uses the binary terms male/female, man/woman, or husband/wife to stress that there are only two sexes/genders,<sup>12</sup> that one’s gender corresponds to one’s biological sex, that the Creator designed heterosexual sexuality for humans, and that sexuality is to be expressed only within a monogamous, heterosexual marriage of a male and a female with biologically determined sexual identities (Gen 2:18–24; Song 3:4; Matt 5:31–32; 19:4–9; 1 Cor 7:1–5; Eph 5:33).

### Sexual Deviations

God designed and created human sexuality for a purpose. Because He is the Creator, God has the right to regulate sexual expression. So, for example, He prohibits fornication, adultery, incest, rape, and desiring someone who is not one’s spouse (e.g., Exod 20:14, 17; 22:16–17; Lev 18:6–18; 20:11–17; Deut 22:23–29; Matt 5:28–29; Gal 5:19–21). The boundaries God has set around the expression of human sexuality are not to be violated, either in act or in thought. The sexual expression that deviates from the creation order and intent is sinful. Such sexual expressions are abominable and defiling (Lev 18:22, 24; Ezek 22:11; Heb 13:4), and God holds the nations accountable for them (Lev 18:3–5, 24–28).

**Homosexuality.**<sup>13</sup> The biblical descriptions make clear that homosexuality and lesbianism are “contrary to sound doctrine” (1 Tim 1:10). Engaging in a homosexual act is “acting wickedly” (Gen 19:7–9).<sup>14</sup> In Judges 19:22–25, the Benjamite homosexuals are referred to as “sons of Belial” (lit. “sons of worthlessness”), and the practice is described as a “vile thing” and “wickedness” (Judg 20:4). Peter refers to the men of Sodom as “ungodly” and their act as “sensual conduct of the wicked” and “lust of defiling passion” (2 Pet 6:6–10). Jude describes their act generally as “sexual immorality,” but specifically as going “after strange flesh” that defiles (Jude 7–8).

In Romans 1:26–32, Paul describes homosexuality and lesbianism as “vile affections” (NKJV). Such practices are “shameful,” an “error,” and “not fitting.” Perpetrators do not “retain God in their knowledge” but are of “debased mind” and “deserving of death.” Here,

Paul points back to Genesis 1–2 and Leviticus 18–20. The natural and acceptable intercourse takes place between *male* and *female*. Nature itself shows that the external sexual organs of the female are created to fit those of the male; exchanging them is unnatural (Rom 1:26–27). In 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, the NKJV’s “sodomites” (*arsenokoites*, lit. “man-penetrating man”) describes the giving partner and “homosexual” (*malakos*, lit. “soft-appearing man”) describes the man who plays the role of a woman in the sexual act. As God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for abominations including homosexuality, and the Benjamites were almost destroyed for refusing to give up the perpetrators, so Paul says such persons will not inherit the kingdom.

**Transgenderism.** Scripture takes sex and gender distinctions seriously. The binary character of human sexuality is not to be violated in act, in thought, or in appearance. Scripture’s prohibition of same-sex relationships makes clear that a male must not act sexually as a female (Lev 18:22; Rom 1:26–27). Paul includes the *malakos* among those who will not inherit the kingdom if they fail to repent (1 Cor 6:9–10). As we noted already, this term denotes the male person who acts like a female person in a sexual union. The term thus includes what we may consider as transgender behavior and act.

Scripture even prohibits cross-dressing and any appearances that tend to blur the distinction between the sexes. Besides bodily features and characteristics (Lev 12:2, 5; 2 Sam 19:25; Dan 8:16), males and females are also distinguishable by outward appearances such as dress (Deut 22:5) and hairstyle (1 Cor 11:14–15; Rev 9:8). Some scholars think that the prohibition in Deuteronomy 22:5 is a polemic against Canaanite cultic practices that encouraged transvestitism or cross-dressing, but the most likely basis of this prohibition is the gender distinction made at creation (Gen 1:26–27).<sup>15</sup> Thus, Scripture opposes even the least effort to confuse the male-female distinction.

### Responding to Arguments for LGBTQIA+

Advocates of LGBTQIA+ present human rights as a foundational argument. One advocate has stated, “We have a right to live in a body that matches our self-image and deep desires without someone else being the gatekeeper to our experience.”<sup>16</sup> Scripture is clear, however, that “someone else”—God—is “the gatekeeper to our experience” as humans because He is our Creator. The psychiatrist Paul McHugh is closer to this fact when he states that “transgendered men do not become women, nor do transgendered women become men. All . . . become feminized men or masculinized women, counterfeits or impersonators of the sex with which they ‘identify.’ In that lies their problematic future.”<sup>17</sup> And Katie



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McCoy adds that “the sexed body is indivisible from the gendered self”<sup>18</sup>

A corollary argument is that of the *feeling*—an internal gender sense or orientation other than that matching one’s bodily features. However, Scripture describes wrongful sexual expression as “sinful passions” (Rom 7:5) and “sensual passions” (2 Pet 2:7, 18). As we noted already, sexual expression is a soft element of human identity and, therefore, controllable. For that reason, Scripture prohibits not only wrongful sexual acts but also wrongful sexual desire with expressions such as ‘you shall not desire’ (Exod 20:17; 1 Thess 4:6) and “pluck it out” or “cut it off” (Matt 5:28–29).

Another corollary argument is that of freedom to engage in any kind of sexual activity once it is between consenting adults. But Scripture also regulates the sexual acts of consenting adults. Consider the case of a man and a betrothed lady in Deuteronomy 22:23–25. Even if both consented to the act, they were both subject to capital punishment. The same is true of perpetrators of homosexuality and lesbianism in Romans 1:26–32 and 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 whom Paul describes as deserving of death. Scripture requires believers to control their passions (1 Thess 4:3–8)—to shun wrong sexual expressions even if the feeling is mutual and between consenting adults, whether heterosexual (Deut 22:23–25) or homosexual (Rom 1:26–27).

In some societies, the human rights argument has received legal support and, sometimes, enforcement. But human rights must not stand against God’s claim upon His creation (Gen 1–2). Jesus made clear that God’s will as expressed in His word transcends human law (Matt 19:7–9). The Creator requires that we acknowledge that we are creatures and so we must glorify Him with our bodies (Acts 5:29; 1 Cor 6:19–20). Not everything that may be *desired* or *felt* (orientation), expressed by *consenting* adults, claimed as a *right*, and backed by state *law* is good and right before God.

How about intersex and gender dysphoria? Apart from those who feel an internal gender sense other than their biological sex and express that sense outwardly (in behavior or through surgery), there are those whose chromosomes, gonads, hormones, internal sex organs, and genitals *differ* from the two patterns of male or female (intersex). Being born with biological features that are not typically male or female must be a disturbing condition, and seeking surgical, medical, or psychological help may be necessary. Still, there are those who experience a mismatch between their internal sense of gender and their biological features (gender dysphoria)<sup>19</sup> without expressing it outwardly. While this can be a genuine struggle, the Christian does not have to act on his/her feeling contrary to God’s word and biological characteristics (or nature). The fall resulted

in an enfeebling of nature (Gen 3; Rom 8), its effects seen in the body (Rom 6:6, 12; 7:24), mind (Rom 1:21; 2 Cor 3:14–15; 4:4), and emotions (Rom 1:6–27; Gal 5:24; 2 Tim 3:2–4). As Paul intimates in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, seeking divine help is necessary to overcome such attraction. Through God’s grace, one can receive the power to manage the struggle in honor (2 Cor 12:9; 1 Thess 4:4–5) or remain celibate (Matt 19:12). Physical, emotional, and spiritual healing is also possible through the divine touch (Mark 5:1–20; Luke 5:12–15; cf. 8:48, 50; 17:19; 18:42).

### Sexuality, Worldview, and Authority

The prevailing sexual theories contradict the biblical perspective that gender is determined biologically, that a human does not *have* a body but *is* a body, and that sexual activity cannot be disconnected from sexual identity. The worldview behind the redefinition of sexuality is a secular one, where authority rests with science, society, and ultimately the self. Some Christians with a semi-biblical worldview move along and seek to reinterpret biblical passages to agree with current trends in society. But ultimately, the issue of LGBTQIA+ is a question about the authority of the word of God.

Peter and Jude address the issue of authority concerning sexual expression. Using the example of Sodom and Gomorrah, they describe the fates of the ungodly and the godly. Peter says that those who indulge in the “lust of defiling passion,” like the homosexuals of Sodom and Gomorrah, “despise authority” (2 Pet 2:6–10). Jude 7–8 similarly describes those who “defile the flesh” and “reject authority,” likening them to the men of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Greek terms translated as “despise” and “reject” in these contexts describe the attitude of disrespecting, slighting, or making void. In both passages, “authority” translates the Greek *kyriotes* (lit. “lordship,” translated as “dominion” in Eph 1:21 and Col 1:16). The authority that is despised through the lust of defiling passion is Christ’s authority (see 2 Pet 2:1, 11; Jude 4).

Scripture speaks against wrongful sexual expression in its various forms. However, it also indicates that change is possible. This change includes a change of worldview and acceptance of the authority of God and His word. When we submit to the authority of Christ, the “old” passes away (2 Cor 5:17) and we put on the “new man” (Eph 4:20–24). We then, being partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4), are able to control our passions in holiness and flee sexual immorality (Matt 5:28–29; 19:12; Rom 7:5; 1 Cor 6:18; 1 Thess 4:4–6). Those among the Corinthian believers who turned from homosexual practices received forgiveness and cleansing (1 Cor 6:9–11). The same grace is available today to anyone who turns to the Lord.

## Conclusion

Humans are sexual beings. We live and relate as sexual persons. Sexuality is part of our existence; it is an expression of our being. Sexual beings express sexual feelings, but human sexuality operates within specific boundaries regulated by God's word. The revolutionary sexual theories that are being promoted across societies today stand against Scripture, seek to disrupt nature, and promote chaos. "Sex is not just about sex. The way we understand and express our sexuality points to our deepest-held convictions about who we are, who God is, who Jesus is, what the church is (or should be), the meaning of love, the ordering of society, and the mystery of the universe."<sup>20</sup> Bible-believing Christians must treat others with love and respect. They must also find ways to support those who are struggling with sexual identity issues. However, loving, respecting, and supporting LGBTQIA+ individuals must be done with a view to leading them to the biblical standard on sexual identity and expression, recognizing that it is only in Christ that "we are complete" (Col 2:10).



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## Endnotes

- 1 According to the American Psychological Association, "Gender identity refers to a person's internal sense of being male, female or something else; gender expression refers to the way a person communicates gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, hairstyles, voice or body characteristics" (<https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbtq/transgender-people-gender-identity-gender-expression#:~:text=Transgender%20is%20an%20umbrella%20term,people%20and%20their%20experiences%20grow>).
- 2 For extensive treatments of sexuality, see Ekkehardt Mueller and Elias Brasil de Souza, *Sexuality: Contemporary Issues from a Biblical Perspective*, Biblical Research Institute Studies in Biblical Ethics 2 (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 2022).
- 3 Madison Bentley, "Sanity and Hazard in Childhood," *The American Journal of Psychology* 58 (1945), 228.
- 4 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (London: John Cape, 1953; originally published in Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1949), 273.
- 5 John Money, "Hermaphroditism, Gender, and Precocity in Hyperadrenocorticism: Psychologic Findings," *Bulletin of the Johns Hopkins Hospital* 96.6 (1955): 253–264. See also John Money, Joan G. Hampson, and John Hampson, "An Examination of Some Basic Sexual Concepts: The Evidence of Human Hermaphroditism," *Bulletin of the Johns Hopkins Hospital* 97.4 (1955): 301–319.
- 6 Robert Stoller, *Sex and Gender: The Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (London: H. Karnac, 1968). The term "gender identity" was introduced in 1964 by Robert Stoller, "The Hermaphroditic Identity of Hermaphrodites," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 139 (1964): 453–457; idem, "A Contribution to the Study of Gender Identity," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 45 (1964): 220–226 and R. R. Greenson, "On Homosexuality and Gender Identity," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 45 (1964): 217–219.
- 7 Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 15. Second-Wave Feminism triggered Gender Studies as an academic discipline.

- 8 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), xxix. Third-Wave Feminism led to 'denaturalization' and resignification of bodily categories.
- 9 Francis Kuriakose and Deepa Kylasam Iyer, "LGBT Rights and Theoretical Perspectives," Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics, December 2020, 5, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1291>. The article includes an extensive review of gender theories.
- 10 See Christian Wildberg, "Neoplatonism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/neoplatonism/>.
- 11 Sexual identity is formed at conception (e.g., Luke 1:36).
- 12 Contrary to the view that there are more than one hundred genders, Debra Soh is emphatic: "No. There are two: female and male. There is zero scientific evidence to suggest that any other genders exist" (Debra Soh, *The End of Gender: Debunking the Myths about Sex and Identity in Our Society* [New York: Threshold, 2020], 67–68, cited in Alberto R. Timm, "The Impact of Great Revolutions on Marriage and Family," in *Family: With Contemporary Issues on Marriage and Parenting*, ed. Ekkehardt Mueller and Elias Brasil de Souza, Biblical Research Institute Studies in Biblical Ethics 3 [Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2023], 635).
- 13 For a detailed discussion, see Ekkehardt Mueller, "Homosexuality and Scripture," in *Sexuality: Contemporary Issues from a Biblical Perspective*, Biblical Research Institute Studies in Biblical Ethics 2, ed. Ekkehardt Mueller and Elias Brasil de Souza (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 2022), 415–453; Ekkehardt Mueller, *Homosexuality, Scripture, and the Church*, Biblical Research Institute Reflections 6 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010).
- 14 The perpetrators at Sodom knew they were doing evil. They even promised to "deal worse" with Lot than with his visitors (Gen 19:9).
- 15 Elias Brasil de Souza and Larry L. Lichtenwaller, "Transgenderism: Reflections from a Biblical Perspective," in *Sexuality: Contemporary Issues from a Biblical Perspective*, Biblical Research Institute Studies in Biblical Ethics 2, ed. Ekkehardt Mueller and Elias Brasil de Souza (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald, 2022), 464–466.

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16 Words of Florence Ashley cited in Kim Armstrong, “Rain Before Rainbows: The Science of Transgender Flourishing,” Association for Psychological Science, <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/transgender-flourishing>.

17 Paul McHugh, “Transgenderism: A Pathogenic Meme,” <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2015/06/15145/>.

18 Katie J. McCoy, “What It Means to Be Male and Female,” in *Created in the Image of God: Applications and Implications for Our Cultural Confusion*, ed. David S. Dockery with Lauren McAfee (Nashville, TN: Forefront Books, 2023), 149.

19 “No one knows exactly what causes gender dysphoria. Some experts believe that hormones in the womb, genes, and cultural and environmental

factors may be involved” (<https://www.mountsinai.org/health-library/diseases-conditions/gender-dysphoria#:~:text=No%20one%20knows%20exactly%20what,environmental%20factors%20may%20be%20involved>).

20 Christopher West, “Our Bodies Tell God’s Story,” in *Sanctified Sexuality: Valuing Sex in an Oversexed World*, ed. Sandra L. Glahn and C. Gary Barnes (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2020), 17.



“ These days, sexuality is equated with the truth of the individual, which is arguably our era’s most prominent fiction regarding the nature of truth. ”

Rüdiger Safranski, *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*

As quoted in Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, p. 201

# What is the Unpardonable Sin?

*Edwin Reynolds*<sup>1</sup>

Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age, or in the age to come. Matthew 12:31, 32 (NASB).

**T**he difficulty of this passage is a matter of understanding the nature of the sin which is described as being unpardonable. What constitutes blasphemy against the Holy Spirit or speaking against the Holy Spirit, and why is this sin considered unpardonable? If every other sin and blasphemy is pardonable, why is this one sin not pardonable? Why is it worse to speak against the Holy Spirit than to speak against Jesus Christ, the Son of Man?

**Conflicts Between Jesus and the Pharisees**—We need to begin by looking at the context of the passage, to see what Jesus was talking about, to whom, and under what circumstances. Our text in Matthew 12 and Mark 3:28–29 (the parallel passage) describes a conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. Matthew begins with the Pharisees confronting Jesus about plucking and eating grain on the Sabbath, which they held to be unlawful (Matt 12:2). From there, Jesus enters a synagogue and heals a man with a withered hand. Again, the Pharisees accuse Him of Sabbath breaking, and at the end of the incident they go out and take counsel against Him how they might destroy Him (vv. 10, 14). Jesus then withdraws and heals all the sick among the multitudes that follow Him, warning them against unnecessarily invoking the wrath of the Jewish leaders by making His deeds known (vv. 15–16). Yet when a demon-possessed blind and mute man was brought to Him for healing and was healed, the people were amazed and could not restrain themselves from asking, “Could this be the Son of David?” (vv. 22–23). By this rhetorical question, they were implying that Jesus was giving evidence that He was the promised Messiah. When this saying was rehearsed in the ears of the Pharisees, they retorted, “It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons” (v. 24 NIV). They could not deny the miracle, so they tried to credit it to demonic powers (cf. Mark 3:30). Jesus responded that it could not be so, since a house divided against itself cannot stand (vv. 25, 26). Instead, He credited His expelling of the demons to the

power of the Holy Spirit, as evidence that the kingdom of God was present in their midst (v. 28), despite their rejection of it. “He who is not with Me is against Me,” Jesus declared (v. 30).

**The Work of the Holy Spirit**—The conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees is the context in which Jesus pronounces the words in our text. In Greek, these words begin with the expression *dia touto*, which means “because of this” or “for this reason.” It was their defiant and persistent opposition to Christ that was the reason why He felt the need to express Himself so clearly and forcefully to them about the dangers of their active resistance to the work of the Holy Spirit on their hearts. By attributing the power of Jesus to demons instead of to the Holy Spirit, the Pharisees were denying the work of the Holy Spirit in the ministry of Jesus. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to bring conviction of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment (John 16:8). If the work of the Holy Spirit is persistently resisted, there can be no conviction in regard to these essentials with reference to salvation. The Holy Spirit convicts people of sin when they do not believe in Jesus (John 16:9). In the face of indisputable evidence, the Pharisees chose not to believe in Jesus and sought every opportunity to defeat His influence and even to destroy Him. By so doing, they were rejecting the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They were hardening their hearts to His convicting voice, and the result was that they were increasingly insensitive to that voice. One cannot speak against the Holy Spirit while at the same time remaining sensitive to His voice and responsive to the conviction He attempts to instill.

“No one need look upon the sin against the Holy Ghost as something mysterious and indefinable. The sin against the Holy Ghost is the sin of persistent refusal to respond to the invitation to repent” (FLB 58).

A similar experience may be described in 1 Timothy 4:2 regarding those who have their consciences seared with a hot iron, i.e., rendered insensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. In Hebrews 6:4–6, there is a most serious warning against turning away from the truth after having been enlightened by receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are told that it is impossible to renew such persons again to repentance—although, as Jesus taught in Matthew 19:26, what is impossible with men is still possible with God—because they willfully, with full knowledge, participate as it were in crucifying again the Son of God and putting Him to open shame.<sup>2</sup> This is what is meant by the unpardonable sin.



## Scripture Spotlight

**The Nature of the Unpardonable Sin**—The sin referred to in Matthew 12:31–32 is not an act of carelessness, ignorance, or mere unbelief, but a persistent, defiant refusal to accept the indisputable evidence of the work of God’s Spirit as good, speaking of it as if it were evil and resisting the Spirit’s work in the heart. Even speaking against Jesus is a forgivable sin (Matt 12:32), but one should beware of speaking persistently against the One whose work it is to bring conviction of sin. The only sin that cannot be forgiven is the one that is not confessed and forsaken and for which forgiveness is not sought. If one is concerned about having committed the unpardonable sin, that concern is in itself patent evidence that the Holy Spirit is bringing conviction to the heart and that the person has not done so, for the one who has already committed the unpardonable sin would never care about it. The appeal found in Hebrews 3:7–9 is pertinent here: “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years” (RSV).

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### Endnotes

1 This article was previously published as Edwin Reynolds, “What Is the Unpardonable Sin?” in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, ed. Gerhard Pfandl, Biblical Research Institute Studies 2 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010), 270–272.

2 See McVay on Hebrews 6:4–6 in *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, ed., Gerhard Pfandl, Biblical Research Institute Studies 2 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010), 403–406.

“ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ”

(Colossians 3:4–10, ESV)

## The BRI Welcomes a New Assistant Director

**K**eldie Paroschi joined the BRI team in October 2024 in a new position as BRI Assistant Director. Born in Brazil, she brings international experience with her since she lived and studied in Europe, South-America, and the United States. Keldie is fluent in Portuguese, English, German, and skilled in the biblical languages. She holds a BA in Theology from the Theological Seminary at the Adventist University of São Paulo (Brazil), an MA in Religion from Andrews University, and currently is a Ph.D. candidate in New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary. She has published several peer-reviewed scholarly articles and has served as an online teacher, chaplain, and also helped with editing several BRI book projects. Her research interest includes Paul, the resurrection, and the reliability of the Gospels. Together with Frank M. Hasel she was the co-host and conversation partner in the podcast series “Understanding Adventist Beliefs”, that covered all 28 Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, produced by the Communication Department of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL-k2Gb-DBYo8Gjxx9GU3EvQMPKR7owMwh>). We are delighted to welcome Keldie to the BRI team and extend a warm welcome to her, as she joins the BRI in the service and ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.





# Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers

The book *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers* is the second volume in a three-volume series on Biblical Interpretation, published by the Biblical Research Institute. It applies the hermeneutical principles laid out in volumes one and three and contains a collection of short articles that explain difficult Bible texts and questions from the Old and new Testament. If you have ever wondered why Christian scholars interpret

Scripture in so many different ways this book is for you. The forty-nine authors who contributed to this volume are all highly qualified Seventh-day Adventist scholars who provide concise answers to challenging Bible texts. It is a book that will benefit every pastor and church member who would like to understand perplexing Bible texts better. The book is also available in digital format Kindle at <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0DCKCXYVY>



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