

Joan or John?

Christian Ethics: This Year's Dilemma

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Every year at the conclusion of my Survey of Christian Ethics class at Southern Seminary, I give my students a final ethical situation to answer for their final examination. They are graded not on their conclusion, but on how they arrived there. They answer, and then we discuss it communally as a class. The question below is this year's dilemma. Also included is my five-part response to the question originally published at www.russellmoore.com in May 2009.

THE QUESTION

This question takes place sometime in the future, in your ministry.

Joan is a fifty year-old woman who has been visiting your church for a little over a year. She sits on the third row from the back, and usually exits during the closing hymn, often with tears in her eyes. Joan approaches you after the service on Sunday to tell you that she wants to follow Jesus as her Lord.

You ask Joan a series of diagnostic questions about her faith, and it is clear she understands the gospel. She still seems distressed though. When you ask if she's repented of her sin, she starts to cry and grit her teeth.

"I don't know," she says. "I don't know how...I don't know where to start...Can I meet with you privately?"

You, Joan, and a godly Titus 2-type women's ministry leader in your church meet in your office right away, and Joan tells you her story.

She wasn't born Joan. She was born John. From early on in John's life, though, he felt as though he was "a woman trapped in a man's body." Joan says, "I don't mean to repeat that old shopworn cliché, but it really is what I felt like."

Joan tells you that when she was twenty she began the process of "transitioning" from life as a man to life as a woman. She underwent extensive hormone therapy, followed by extensive plastic surgery—including so-called "gender reassignment surgery." She has lived for the past thirty years—physically and socially—as a woman.

"I want to do whatever it takes to follow Jesus," Joan tells you. "I want to repent...I just, I don't know how to do it.

"I am surgically now a woman. I've taken hormones that give me the appearance and physical makeup of a woman," she says. "Even if I were to put on a suit and tie right now, I'd just look like a woman with a suit and tie. Not to mention the fact that, well, I am physically... a woman.

“To complicate matters further,” Joan says through tears, “I adopted my daughter, Clarissa, when she was eight months old and she’s ten years old now. She doesn’t know about my past life as...as a man. She just knows me as her Mom.

“I know the sex change surgery was wrong. I know that my life is twisted. I’m willing to do whatever Jesus would have me to do to make it right,” she says. “But what would Jesus have me to do?”

Joan asks you, “Am I too messed up to repent and be saved? If not, what does it mean for me to repent and live my life as a follower of Jesus? What is right for me to do?”

Show me, step-by-step, what you would say to Joan. Show me what you would tell her to do, short-term and long-term, and show me why in terms of a Christian ethic. Use Scripture, Christian theology, and wisdom to demonstrate not just your final decisions, but how you arrived at them.

You may use any resource that would be available to you in a real life pastoral situation. This includes Holy Scripture, books, articles, and the seeking of outside counsel from others.

Furthermore, show me how you would lead the rest of your congregation to think through and act in this situation with the mind of Christ.

Did Jesus Die for Joan?

Put a bit more succinctly, Joan was born John, but has lived as Joan for thirty years. She has a daughter. She now is convicted of sin and wants to follow Christ. She’ll do whatever Jesus would have her to do, but she needs some direction from you, her pastor.

Now, before you start posting complaints, let me say that I’m using the name “Joan” and the female pronouns here simply as a literary device, to postpone the debate a bit as to whether this person is really male or female.

In class, I let my students bat around and debate one another about how this situation should best be handled, and then I weighed in. Here’s what I think is at stake in this situation, and how a Christian ought to look at it.

The first issue is the gospel. Christ Jesus came to save sinners. The Lord Jesus offered up his life as a sacrifice for this person (this isn’t an extent of the atonement debate, so save that one for later), and his bloody cross and empty tomb are enough to reconcile any sinner, including this one, to God. The pastor should abandon any sense of revulsion because Joan’s situation is “weird” or “perverted.” All sin is weird and perverted. The fact that any of it (especially our own) seems “normal” to us is part of what we need the gospel for.

The second issue is repentance. Repentance is necessary for salvation, as is articulated in the gospel message throughout the Scripture (Mark 1:15; Acts 3:19, 17:30). I think the account of our Lord’s interaction with the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-29) is in order here, as well as his confrontation by the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24-30). In both cases, Jesus

probed in order to bring forth, in the first case, a visible lack of repentance, or, in the second, a visible manifestation of faith. The message Joan has heard is the same message every Christian has heard, “Come, follow me.” The pastor wishes to know, as he would with any sinner, whether she’s counted the cost of doing so.

At the same time, the pastor ought to know there is no simple solution here. Whatever Joan does will leave havoc in its wake. Her daughter will either grow up with a “mother” who has deceived her all life long about the most basic aspect of who she is, and what their relationship is, or she will go through the trauma of discovering her Mom is actually her Dad.

My counsel would be, after discerning that Joan is truly trusting in Christ (and it certainly appears that she is), to make sure she understands that part of the sin she’s walking away from is a root-level rebellion against the Creator. God’s creation is good, and he does not create generic persons but “male and female,” in his own image (Gen 1:27). In seeking to “become” a woman, John has established himself as a god, determining the very structure of his createdness. Part of the freedom that comes in Christ is his recognition that he is a creature, not a god, not a machine, not a freak.

This means that the pastor should, in his role as an undershepherd of Christ, start speaking to Joan as “John,” and identifying him as “him.” This will seem strange and discordant to Joan. Of course it will. What is going on in this person’s life, however, is what goes on in every Christian’s life. We’ve put on a “new man,” crucifying the old way (Eph 4:21-24). We are a “new creation” with the past done away with (2 Cor 5:17). We have a “new name” (Rev 2:17) that seems strange and mystifying, with an extended family we have to learn to love and walk with.

Joan is not going to “feel” like John, and that’s okay. But the pastor must start ministering to him by helping him identify what peace looks like, what the destination is to which he’s headed. And that’s as a man.

Furthermore, the pastor cannot deceive his congregation. He doesn’t need to elaborate on every aspect of this person’s past (any more than he would with any other repentant sinner). But the church baptizes, not an individual, and the church must know the person being baptized. To baptize one created a man as “my sister in Christ” (whatever the baptismal formula used) isn’t doing justice to a God who speaks the truth.

But that’s only the start of the ethical and pastoral dilemmas erupting here.

Should the Surgery Be Reversed?

To respond to the question as to whether “Joan” should go reverse her so-called “gender reassignment” surgery, my answer is no. First of all, no surgery can reassign gender. The surgery mangled John, and sought to create an illusion of a biological reality that isn’t there. There is no way that this surgery can be “reversed,” only another cosmetic illusion created on top of the old one.

Additional surgery would only compound the problem. He should see himself as the equivalent of a biblical eunuch, someone wounded physically by his past sin, but awaiting wholeness in the resurrection from the dead.

He should, though, stop taking the female hormones, allowing his body to revert to its (relatively) natural state.

The issue for John is honesty, it seems to me. This means that he should present himself as what he is, a man created by God as such. This means he should identify himself as a man, and should start dressing in male clothing. This is going to be very, very difficult for him, and he will need his pastors and congregation to bear with him through all the stumbles and backsteps that will come along with this.

The most difficult aspect of this new honesty, however, is not what restroom John uses or the name on his driver's license. It is how he presents himself to a young daughter who has only known him as "Mom."

What About the Daughter?

The issue of how to deal with Clarissa is, admittedly, the most difficult part of this puzzle. A friend said including the daughter in the narrative was the "evil genius" part of the whole thing. For my students at Southern Seminary, the daughter was the most heart-wrenching part of the whole question, and those who had difficulty typically had difficulty at this point. I'm glad that such is the case. The compassion for this daughter, having her entire spectrum of reality turned over, is a mark of a Christian, and certainly a necessary trait for a sheep-herder of God's flock.

First, let me say that I'm aware that "Joan" becoming "John" will wreak havoc on her daughter's life and psyche. I think such havoc will be unleashed either way, and that honesty at this point is less destructive than continuing the illusion. The question, at this point, is not whether the daughter will have a normal life or a traumatic one. The question is whether the people of Christ will be with her through the trauma. I would counsel Joan to tell her daughter at an appropriate (but not unduly delayed) time.

This will be difficult, and John will need his pastor there, along with many godly women from the congregation who are willing to spend hours with this young girl. John should tell her that years before she was born, he was confused, and felt like he was a girl instead of a boy, and that he had spent the last thirty years trying to be a girl. He should tell his daughter, though, that something had changed, he was born again in Christ Jesus, and that means that he gets a new start. He should tell her that he loves her just the same, and that he'll always be here, but he wants her to know that Jesus is putting his life back together, as a man.

This will be confusing and disruptive, but, with the wise counsel of his congregation and its pastors, John can visibly demonstrate before his daughter what regeneration and sanctification actually looks like: slow, painful, but, in the end, worth it for the sake of the gospel.

How Should the Church Respond?

So, if John follows through at this point, what's the expectation of the church, and the responsibility of the congregation, for change in the life of a man who once thought himself a woman?

In saying that I don't think Joan can continue to live as a "woman," I am not saying that regeneration will mean that he suddenly "feels" like a man. John is telling you the truth when he says that he has felt all of his growing-up life like a woman trapped in a man's body. He will probably not suddenly turn into a lumberjack. He will probably grapple with this issue for the rest of his life.

I was saved from, among many other things, covetousness. Coveting seems natural to me. Not coveting is unnatural to me. There's not a day that goes by in which coveting isn't the easier, more natural thing for me. But I fight against covetousness because God is conforming me into the image of Christ (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18). He does this through suffering, through discipline, and through the warlike struggle of the Spirit against the flesh, the new creation against the satanic powers (Rom 5:3-5; Heb 12:5-11; 2 Cor 2:11). Your testimony is the same, if you're in Christ, with any number of sinful patterns and weak points in your life. The same will be true for John. Don't give up on him if he has setbacks, and don't give up on him if he still "feels" like a woman for the rest of his life. Keep pointing him to the gospel, and to the faith that hears and acts.

John's presence in your congregation will probably mean that some Pharisaism will emerge. Some people will find John "freakish." Some of the men will be revolted by the whole idea, and will think they are asserting their masculinity by mocking or marginalizing him (even if just in subtle, eye-rolling sorts of ways). The responsibility of the pastor is to lead his people away from this destructiveness. John's life in the congregation can be a visible signal of the mercies of God. This means the church should, immediately upon receiving John as a repentant sinner, announce that his sin (not in part but the whole!) is nailed to the cross of Christ, buried with Jesus, and obliterated by his resurrection power. This means any ongoing gossip or judgment of John's sin or John's past is itself violence against the gospel, as well as divisiveness in the congregation, and will be disciplined as such.

The shepherds must lead your people to receive John, as they were received by Christ (Rom 15:5-7). The pastors and leaders of the church can help people to see how they can help bear their brother's burdens (Gal 6:2).

This means, first of all, that women in the congregation will be needed to help show his daughter what it means to be a godly woman. Some of them will want to take her into their homes and lives, being mothers and grandmothers in Christ for her (Titus 2:3-5). This also means that the men in the congregation should make a concerted effort to disciple John, receiving him into their circle of friendship, and showing him what it means to follow Christ, and what it means to be a man. For some of them, it will be awkward. So what? It seems awkward for the Lord Jesus to spend time with drunkards, prostitutes, and Gentiles like us, but he did it, and does it even now.

Why Does it Matter?

Since I posted the question about John/Joan, I've had two kinds of responses. Some Christians have said things along the lines of, "I'm glad I'm not in your ethics class! That question is hard!" Others though have said, "You know, that very situation happened in my church."

We're going to have more and more so-called "transgendered" persons in American society, as the culture around us changes. A woman in my congregation told me the other day she was asked when giving blood, "What gender were you at birth?"

Now, we could always bemoan this, and talk about how American culture is slouching toward Gomorrah. We should hope, if there are transgendered persons in the cities and towns and villages around us, that we will see them in our church pews. And we should pray, feverishly, that they will hear the gospel we're preaching as good news for them.

This doesn't mean that we create a new "transgendered" Sunday school class. That's not good news at all; anymore than a "coveters" Sunday school class would be good for me! A gospel church, though, is a church that says whatever you're running from or running to, Jesus offers you life. As long as you're alive, it is not too late for you to find new life in Christ. Jesus loves sinners, and we do too.

You see, the scenario about "Joan" isn't really all that hypothetical. Chances are in your town right now, there are people in that situation. Why don't they show up in our churches? Is it because they doubt if our gospel is really addressed to them? Is it because we doubt it too?

If Joan comes to your church this Sunday and hears the gospel, if "she" decides to throw away everything "she" knows and follow Christ, will your church be there to love him, and to show him how to stop pretending and to fight his way toward what he was created to be? Maybe it would take a Joan at the altar call to make us question whether we really believe what we say and what we sing. Is there really power, wonder-working power, in the blood of the Lamb? Is our gospel really good news for prodigal sons, even for sons so lost they once thought they were daughters?

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