

He, She, Ze, Zir? Navigating pronouns while loving your transgender neighbor

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Since the release of my book, *God and the Transgender Debate*, I have traveled across the country and given numerous talks to Christian audiences on how to understand the new frontier of transgenderism.

In almost every instance, one of the first and most pressing questions I received after speaking was on the subject of pronoun usage concerning how a Christian relates to their transgender neighbor.

These questions came from sincere, compassionate Christians concerned about how to gracefully interact with transgender family members, coworkers, or church visitors while also obeying Scripture and their consciences.

Why pronouns?

Pronoun preference is all the rage in many circles. There is a growing phenomenon for people to state their preferred pronoun, whether on social media bios, email signatures, or even buttons someone wears in social settings. Pronoun preference is increasingly a cause célèbre for virtue signaling one's social awareness in progressive circles.

At root, the transgender debate is a metaphysical debate about whose version of reality we live in, and only one account—Jesus Christ's—can lead us into truth about reality and human flourishing

Pronouns are not an insignificant issue. How a person wants to be referred to communicates how that person understands himself or herself at their deepest, most intimate level. This means that language has deeply significant meaning embedded in its usage. The use of language is an attempt to name and give meaning to reality. Pronouns and gendered names, therefore, refer to a reality in which the transgendered individual is wishing to live. The question we as Christians have to consider is whether the reality we are being asked to affirm is objective and corresponds to biblical truth, or whether the reality we are being asked to acknowledge is subjective and false. Nothing less than the truth and authority of God's revelation over created reality is up

for grabs in something as seemingly innocent as pronoun usage. Because, at root, the transgender debate is a metaphysical debate about whose version of reality we live in, and only one account—Jesus Christ’s (Colossians 1:15-20)—can lead us into truth about reality and human flourishing. No amount of willing something into existence that is at odds with one’s biology—such as one’s gender identity—can bring that desired reality about.

Before I state how I’ve evaluated the issue and the conclusion I’ve reached, I think it is important to state that Christians of goodwill who seek to obey and believe the Bible disagree, prudentially, on what the best pathway is concerning transgender persons and pronouns. This is important to establish because this should not be an issue that divides otherwise Bible-believing Christians.

First, let us establish a few general ethical principles that can help guide our thinking on pronoun usage.

Love rejoices in the truth

Paul tells the Corinthian church that love “does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth” (1 Corinthians 13:6).

This entails that the act of truth-telling from the perspective of the Bible is an act of love. This also means, however, that those who do not believe the Bible will likely not receive an act of truth-telling as loving. From the perspective of the non-Christian, shedding light on someone’s sin or error will likely be met with rejection or contempt. Nor is the obligation to state the truth a license to be obnoxious, condescending, or uncaring. The opposite, in fact, should occur (Colossians 4:6).

Concerning pronouns, Christians should, in principle, be willing to speak truthfully to their transgender neighbor if asked their opinion on the matter, and understand that truth-telling is loving, even if it is not received that way. In Article 11, The Nashville Statement helpfully clarifies “our duty [is] to speak the truth in love at all times, including when we speak to or about one another as male or female.”

Love your neighbor

As Christians, we are commanded to love our neighbors (Mark 12:31) and to treat others how we want to be treated (Matthew 7:12). The call to love our neighbors, however, is not a quid pro quo that permits us to affirm whatever your neighbor wants affirmed. As Francis Beckwith writes, “The Golden Rule is not about merely protecting your neighbor’s preferences, but rather, advancing your neighbor’s good.”

This means that loving your neighbor may mean speaking something they will interpret as unloving. But Christian ethics assert that it is never loving to aid and abet a friend or family member who is in error, confusion, or sin—whether intentional or unintentional. The same can be said of all persons as well, while also acknowledging situational constraints may add additional difficulties.

Concerning pronouns, as in all other things, Christians are called to be for everyone—even if we disagree with them or if our neighbor does not perceive our truth-telling as loving.

Obey your conscience

The conscience is the internal tripwire stemming from God giving humans the ability to know right from wrong. When we act righteously in accordance with biblical truth, a freeing obedience and joy results from acting in accord with God’s moral law written on our hearts (Romans 2:14-16). When we act sinfully, our conscience makes us aware of that sin because God endowed us with the knowledge of right from wrong. It is our conscience that condemns us and makes us aware of our need for a Savior. While true that some consciences go awry from unrepentance (1 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:5), for the Christian, the conscience is a vehicle God gives to direct us in the path of righteousness.

Christians should continually strive to reform their consciences according to God’s Word. This means a Christian should, in principle, always follow their conscience in how they respond to a request concerning someone’s preferred pronouns. Christians should speak of what they know to be true at their deepest core. Violating one’s conscience is never a place someone should find themselves.

Live at peace

The Apostle Paul declares “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:18).

Concerning pronouns, this means that Christians should, in principle, not be needlessly combative or confrontational in how we navigate the language of transgenderism. We should attempt to be disarming and defuse circumstances ripe for conflict.

Getting practical

But what does this mean practically as Christians navigate relationships with family members, friends, co-workers and church visitors who may identify as transgender?

Much of how someone will determine their use of pronouns and names is based within a matrix that includes the Bible as the supreme guide, one's social context where the relationship is occurring, and the depth of the relationship itself.

My principles for navigating pronouns and names are the following: First, context determines the level and type of engagement. Second, the depth of the relationship determines one's authority to speak correctively. Third, speaking authoritatively and correctively must be guided preeminently by the authority of Scripture.

The more impersonal the context, the less likely a Christian will feel the need to correct pronoun requests; and the further removed someone is from their transgender family member, friend, or colleague, the less likely the Christian will have the ability to speak authoritatively and correctively to them.

Avoid if you can. If at all possible, avoid using pronouns altogether. Think to yourself: How often are you in conversation with a person where you have to refer to this person's pronoun in the third person? Not very often. So, avoid pronoun use altogether.

Probably use preferred first name. Depending on the context and relationship, if (for example) someone is a biological male who requests to be called by a feminine name, I am more likely to use their preferred name on the grounds that names are not intrinsically gendered. Names are gendered culturally, which is important, but not the only point to consider. A man may be named Aaron and a woman Erin, yet both sound the same. I've known boys and girls named Kelly and Cameron. My own wife's name, in fact, is the only time I've heard hers applied to a female.

Additionally, it is likely that if you are just meeting someone for the first time who identifies as transgender, the name associated with their biological sex will not be known, so by default you would be left calling them by the name given at their introduction.

Be honest in public. Though it is politically incorrect to do so, I will not refer to someone with their desired pronoun in a public venue such as a talk. Those with writing or speaking platforms have an obligation to speak and write truthfully and not kowtow to political correctness or excuse falsehood. This means I will call Bruce Jenner "he," or if I do say "Caitlyn," I will still say, "him." Political commentator David French argues that the pronoun debate is not simply about effete political manners, but compelled speech: "...when your definition of manners requires that I verbally consent to a fundamentally false and important premise, then I dissent. You cannot use my manners to win your culture war. I will speak respectfully, I will never

use a pronoun with the intent of causing harm, and if I encounter a person in obvious emotional distress I will choose my words very carefully. But I will not say what I do not believe.” Furthermore, compulsion is unacceptable. The compelled speech element to the pronoun debate is significant, since in some areas of the country, “misgendering” someone with the wrong pronoun can result in civil penalties. That should be named for what it is: an unlawful power grab designed to conscript people’s consciences into cooperating with politically correct fiction. No government, movement, or ideology, however, can usurp the conscience’s right to speak freely and truthfully (Acts 5:29).

For the majority of us, this is not a culture war issue. It is an issue of neighborliness. Here is how I would evaluate some of the tricky situations.

Family. If I were to have a close family member (let us say a child or sibling) identify as transgender and request a first name or pronoun in line with their gender identity, I would not honor this request. Why? Because I know this person intimately (their history, their struggles), and in all likelihood I possess the relational capital to understand this person’s story and speak truthfully to them. I will not aid and abet my loved one’s confusion and sin. It is highly likely that my family member would find this offensive; but in being truthful with this person, who knows if I am the only remaining person in their life stirring their conscience with truth. I would communicate my unconditional love and desire for this person to be in my life, and how both motivate my concern to speak truthfully to them because I want what is best for them.

The same guidelines apply when navigating this issue with friends of varying degrees of relational depth.

Coworkers. This, admittedly, gets trickier. Many individuals are not looking to enter the fray in their workplaces. They want to do their jobs, provide for their families, and live their lives. This is where each person in the workplace has to evaluate their context and the relationship with their coworker. In general, here is my principle: Nearness means clarity. Think of a concentric circle. How someone will choose to refer to a colleague will depend on the depth of the relationship. If you have a transgender coworker in the same department whom you hardly ever see or talk to, you lack the relational capital and depth to speak truthfully into that person’s life. In fact, not speaking to the person except to correct them seems unseemly and rude. Some Christians’ consciences may have no problem calling a person they do not know by their desired name or pronoun, and I do not begrudge them for thinking this way if they are removed from the person and not in a context that makes authentic

relationship building possible. While not avoiding the person, it is wise to evade circumstances that would put you in a position to violate your conscience.

One important caveat especially relevant to corporate settings is the expectation that employees sign statements to some effect signaling their agreement with a company's diversity compliance standards, which may include invasive policies related to transgenderism, such as pronouns. Brothers and sisters, if this is you, you need to evaluate your conscience. If you find yourself in a setting where your employer is requiring you to violate your conscience as a condition of your employment, let me be as clear as possible: You need to be forthright with your employer. Ask for an exception. If it won't be given, it might be time to find a new place of employment. None of this is easy, but Jesus never promised that following him would be without great personal cost. In fact, he said just the opposite—He foretold it (Matthew 16:24-26). But Christ also promised that taking up the cross at great cost to ourselves is the pathway to finding greater union with Him.

Church Settings. It is possible you may not know someone visiting your church is transgender and will unknowingly use their desired pronoun and name. If that is the case, a Christian is not at fault. Also, someone who is very obviously transgender may visit your church. I do not know how a question of pronouns would come up in a momentary introduction between persons, but I do think it would be needlessly confrontational to immediately correct someone's pronoun preference if they are visiting. Again, avoid pronouns altogether. I think the more appropriate route is to gloss over whatever pronoun discussion ensues, greet the person kindly, listen to how they heard of your church, get to know them, and invite them back to church in hopes of building a relationship. Context and relationship matter. To the extent that individuals begin to gain the relational capital to speak truthfully to this person about their confusion, those attempts should be made and made soon. One important caveat: to the extent that a visitor becomes hostile, rudely adamant, or disruptive about pronoun usage, I can foresee the necessity of pastors and elders addressing it immediately in order to guard the flock (Acts 20:28; Titus 1).

Related, topics like this should prompt churches to preemptively develop policies on restroom usage so as to protect the privacy and safety of their members.

I do not deny that there may be contextual and relational ambiguities unique to each person's circumstances, but in general, if a Christian is asked his or her opinion on the matter of pronoun usage, whether by a transgender person themselves, or by a friend regarding the cultural debate around pronouns, a Christian ought always speak truthfully.

Pay the price

I often get asked questions about various vocations where dilemmas like pronoun usage are likely to arise. Most assume there is an easy resolution available. Increasingly, I find myself saying to people, “There’s not, so be prepared to pay the consequences for honoring your conscience and Scripture.”

That is sobering, right?

That is the age in which we live. There are vocations that I foresee being very difficult for Christians to enter in the future, among them public education, counseling, and medicine. This is tragic. The foreclosing of certain vocations from Christian influence will deny these vocations the common grace of Christian witness impacting them.

In my role at the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, I get requests almost weekly from individuals who find themselves in compromising situations regarding transgenderism. In most of these circumstances, the solutions I provide are often not resolutions to their dilemma. I wish I had better answers, but the direction of culture, law, and government policy is making satisfactory resolution more and more difficult. What I do know is that Christians should seek guidance from mature Christians and from their pastors. Regardless of the circumstances, the task of the Christian in society remains the same: Love God, love your neighbor, and promote the truth of how God’s design is best for us and our neighbors.

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