

# No Longer Male and Female

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*A Biblical Guide for Our  
Questions about Gender*

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WILL BROWN

**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
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# CONTENTS

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|                                                                                                                              |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Foreword by Will Willimon                                                                                                    | ix |
| Introduction                                                                                                                 | 1  |
| 1. Eternal Truth in a Changing World<br><i>Can faithful Christians understand<br/>gender in new ways?</i>                    | 9  |
| 2. Four Dimensions of Gender<br><i>Is there more to gender than just our bodies?<br/>What do we mean by male and female?</i> | 23 |
| 3. God Looks at the Heart<br><i>Why should we take seriously how people<br/>say they feel on the inside?</i>                 | 37 |
| 4. Genesis and the Gender Binary<br><i>Didn't God create people "male and female"?<br/>What else is there?</i>               | 51 |
| 5. Pronouns<br><i>What's the deal with sharing pronouns?<br/>How can one person be they?</i>                                 | 65 |

|                                                                                                                     |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 6. Eunuchs in the Bible                                                                                             | 79  |
| <i>How should the church relate to gender-expansive people? What about when we disagree about LGBTQ+ inclusion?</i> |     |
| 7. There Is No Longer Male and Female                                                                               | 93  |
| <i>In a world where “there is no longer male and female,” does gender still matter?</i>                             |     |
| 8. Embracing God’s Gender-Diverse Children                                                                          | 107 |
| <i>How do we care for gender-expansive people, their families, and the faith communities we share?</i>              |     |
| Conclusion                                                                                                          | 123 |
| Acknowledgments                                                                                                     | 131 |
| Notes                                                                                                               | 133 |

*"No Longer Male and Female* may well be the finest book available for church leaders, congregants, parents, and anyone seeking to better understand gender identity and gender expansiveness. With the mind of a scholar and the heart of a pastor, Will Brown weaves together thoughtful biblical reflection, personal experience, and gracious wisdom to help people of faith grow in both understanding and compassion. Near the book's conclusion, Brown turns to Romans 14:15, inviting us—whatever our differences—to walk together in love. That invitation captures the spirit of this remarkable work. This book is essential reading for anyone who desires to be better informed and more fully prepared to affirm and care for all God's children."

—**BRIAN HENDERSON**, Executive Director,  
Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists

"If you are trying to figure out how to think about transgender, gender-expansive, and nonbinary people in relation to the Bible and the Christian tradition, read this book. At once biblically rooted in addressing theological questions and pastorally sensitive to lived experience, you'll find this book has anticipated most of your questions and responded to them with the joy and wonder of an author who revels in God's good creation and with the faithful intellectual rigor of an experienced pastoral leader. Brown's *No Longer Male and Female* enters both the ordinary and extraordinary experiences of gender-expansive and nonbinary people, beginning with his own family's life, and leads readers not only to greater understanding but to deeper wisdom in our approach to honoring the lives of those who beautifully exemplify God's creativity in living outside a restrictive gender binary. This book will be a gift to parents of gender-expansive children, a useful text in the seminary classroom, and a must-read for churches committed to supporting queer and trans people."

—**CODY J. SANDERS**, Associate Professor of  
Congregational and Community Care Leadership,  
Luther Seminary, and author of *A Brief Guide  
to Ministry with LGBTQIA Youth*

*"No Longer Male and Female* is a gentle introduction to Christian conversations about gender. Brown meets readers where they are, modeling the Christian practice of continuously evolving in our understanding of Scripture and the world around us while simultaneously making clear the biblical call to show up in love and care for our transgender and nonbinary siblings. This book will undoubtedly be a valuable guide for those who are unsure where to begin."

—**JAMIE BRUESEHOFF**, author of *Raising Kids beyond the Binary: Celebrating God's Transgender and Gender-Diverse Children*

"A winsome and effective Christian treatment of how to understand, love, and include transgender people in churches. This book could become the go-to guide for pastors."

—**DAVID P. GUSHEE**, author of *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity*

"Gender is far more complex than our culture, our assumptions, or even our language often allows. We are tempted to simplify it—to fit comfortably within familiar categories and expectations—but Brown invites us to do something more faithful: to lean into that complexity with courage, humility, and compassion. With a father's devotion, a pastor's heart, and a scholar's biblical insight, Brown helps readers unpack difficult questions, navigate ambiguity with grace, and see their neighbors through the lens of Jesus's greatest commandment: love. This is the resource I have been waiting for—a thoughtful, trustworthy guide that I will gladly place in the hands of parents, grandparents, loved ones of gender-expansive persons, church leaders, and small groups seeking a more faithful conversation about gender and belonging."

—**MARK FELDMEIR**, Senior Pastor, St. Andrew United Methodist Church, Highlands Ranch, Colorado, and author of *Life after God: Finding Faith When You Can't Believe Anymore*

“Brown offers an accessible introduction for faith communities that are in search of curious, honest engagement with the idea of gender expansiveness. Brown’s voice is conversational, approachable, and authentic, grounded in faithful biblical interpretation and holy wrestling with Scripture. As a biblical scholar, a minister, and a parent of nonbinary children, I enthusiastically welcome *No Longer Male and Female* as an important resource toward more fully loving and understanding our queer loved ones and community members, in dialogue with the Spirit’s leading of the church in our time and place.”

—**AMANDA C. MILLER**, author of *Voices of Resistance: The Bible’s Songs of Victory, Peace, and Protest*

“*No Longer Male and Female* is a book for this moment. Conversations about gender identity are unfolding everywhere—around dinner tables, over coffee, and throughout our public discourse—and many people find themselves wrestling with the tension between what they believe the Bible teaches and how to love and support the gender-expansive people in their lives. With the insight of a scholar, the skill of a pastor, and the heart of a parent, Brown invites readers to see these questions in a new light. This book is an invaluable resource for allies seeking to deepen their understanding and for those with questions about the language, ideas, and experiences that are shaping these conversations. If you’re looking for a thoughtful, accessible, and helpful guide, don’t miss this book!”

—**JOSH SCOTT**, Pastor, GracePointe Church,  
Nashville, Tennessee, and author of *Cross-Examined: Reading the Bible in Times of Division*

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In addition to the thoughtful discussion questions found at the end of each chapter, the author has provided session introduction videos for group and individual use.

These can be found on our YouTube channel at  
<https://www.youtube.com/@wjkpress>.

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## FOREWORD

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Here's a book I watched in the making. I witnessed the journey that became *No Longer Male and Female*, as Will Brown's reflections progressed from the parental quandaries presented by the gift of a gender-expansive child, to the ruminations of a real-life pastor embedded in a congregation, through graduate papers connecting contemporary gender issues with ancient wisdom, to a superb doctor of ministry thesis, and at last to this valuable book that is sure to be a gift to individual Christians and the whole church.

Will states early on, "My family is particularly fortunate to have a gender-expansive child who has drawn our attention to these questions, making us pay attention in a new way." I am grateful to Will's beloved child, and to the grace of God, for the ways my faith and the practice of it have grown from the insight Will shares in this book.

Will is the perfect person to lead us on this journey, inviting us on an unapologetically, even enthusiastically biblical and theological exploration of gender and the Christian faith. He writes gently, lovingly, but with certain conviction, that God intends to speak with us through Scripture on matters of life-and-death significance. If you are uncomfortable talking about issues of gender identity and inclusion, trust me—you could have no better, more patient, and tender pastoral guide to encourage you to grow in your faith and understanding.



Rather than scold or preach, Will invites us to go with him on a personal journey into Scripture, love of neighbor, parenting, and church life. Will's way of communicating gives maximum room for listeners to jump on board. He doesn't ask the reader to go anywhere that he himself has not traveled, but instead reassures us, "My own thinking about these concepts continues to evolve, and perhaps you are on a journey here as well. You may have embraced the idea that gender is more of a spectrum from male to female rather than strictly a binary. Or perhaps the idea of a spectrum feels like a step too far." Still, he encourages us to keep walking with him, perhaps along the way to expand our theological imaginations, viewing these matters through the eyes of Christ.

Never does Will lapse into treating a person's gender orientation and experience as an abstract issue open for cool, detached debate. Throughout, this book keeps things personal, pastoral, and unabashedly *Christian*. Some will receive this book as a moving, intimate, personal testimonial to the grace of God at work in a family's and a father's life. For some, this book will be a life-giving (and maybe lifesaving) read. They are sure to receive loving pastoral guidance for how to think and feel when a loved one reveals that their biological sex does not align with their gender identity. They will take heart from Will's hard-won insights on such questions as "Why should we take seriously how people say they feel on the inside?"

It takes guts to name a book "A Biblical Guide for Our Questions about Gender." *The Bible* as guide even through the emotionally charged debate about gender? Scripture is what shackles contemporary Christians from full, open-hearted participation in contemporary debates over gender-related issues. Right?

Wrong, says this book. The Bible has so many more interesting things to say about gender than you thought. I'm sure that many readers will delight in this book's accessible, heartening biblical interpretation. While gender is not a major biblical concern, it is a gift of God, and the Bible has (surprisingly, I'd say) a richer, more complicated and compassionate take on the subject than that of many contemporary Christians. I love it when the word we hear from Scripture pushes us beyond what some might call merely common sense or the heated debates between left and right. That biblical shove happens all the time in *No Longer Male and Female*.

There's a quite wonderful excursus on what the old-fashioned "thy," "thee," and "thine" language in the King James Bible teaches us about pronouns. Will's reflections on the "neither male nor female" of Galatians 3:28 is a model of theological interpretation of Scripture in which Will allows Paul, of all people, to blow up our simple binaries and move us toward baptismal embrace of the whole spectrum of humanity whom Christ is busy reconciling to himself.

As he discusses the church's treatment of gender minorities and the gifts that they bring to the church, Will never lets us forget that Christ mandates that we think about these matters under his command to love.

Toward the end, Will sums up, in his uniquely beguiling way, his purpose in writing:

My goal in this book has not been to convince you that all new ideas about gender come from God. I know that everyone approaches these questions differently, and many of us are still figuring out exactly what we think. At the very least, though, I hope this book helps you understand some of the concepts that are being discussed and how it is that people of faith can

embrace these expansive conceptions of gender without abandoning their faith or the witness of Scripture. You don't have to choose one or the other. In fact, the more I have read, reflected, and discussed these topics, the more I've realized that the Bible contains as rich and varied perspectives as the church does today.

Welcome to a wonderfully appealing invitation to see all our gender constructs, assumptions, and categories under the categorical imperative of Christ's command to love. Along the way you'll see afresh the great gifts trans people bring to the church and you'll have the opportunity to expand your notions of the grace and responsibility before Christ. Here's a plea for church to make room for all in the name of a savior who has made room for us.

Will Willimon  
April 2026

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## INTRODUCTION

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*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.*

—2 Corinthians 5:17–18

“I’m not *king* of the hill! I’m *queen* of the hill!” my preschooler happily declared atop the playground climber. Since the age of two, my middle child has insisted that they are not a boy, despite being born in a male body. At first, my wife and I tried not to read too much into this. We assumed this was just another childhood phase—like pretending to be a cat or a dragon. But unlike those games, this didn’t fade. It intensified. Our child insisted that this wasn’t pretending; they were truly not a boy. By the middle of kindergarten, they asked to wear a dress and no longer be called “him.” At that moment, we knew our lives were changing in ways we couldn’t predict.

For us as parents, those early days were challenging. My wife and I wanted to be supportive of our child, but we found ourselves unsure what to do. We feared what this revelation would mean for our child’s future, our minds filling with images of middle school bullies—and worse. Not knowing what it’s like to be transgender or nonbinary, we relied on the images we’d seen on the news: political

arguments over bathroom usage, public debates about medical treatments for transgender youth, and terrifying statistics about suicide and mental health. What would our child's future hold? Could we protect them from a hostile world? And how does this relate to our Christian faith and my identity as a Baptist minister?

In the weeks and months that followed that kindergarten declaration, we scrambled to support our child through this transition. We borrowed clothes from neighbors, consulted with the school's staff, bought children's books about gender identity, and devoured parenting resources. Feeling unequipped and uncertain, we worried and prayed and stayed up late having long conversations about how to parent this child we loved, even as neither of us knew where this was headed. After wearing a dress for a couple of weeks and presenting as a girl, our child came to realize that *girl* didn't quite feel right, but neither did *boy*. They asked if they had to be one or the other: "Can't I just be me, and not be called 'he' or 'she'?"<sup>1</sup>

## A Changing Society

Ready or not, I found myself standing in unfamiliar territory. Maybe you have experienced something similar. Maybe you're a parent or grandparent who loves a gender-expansive child and is trying to understand their emerging identity. Maybe you're a pastor or teacher who wants to better care for the gender-diverse child in your midst. Or maybe you're just curious about all the new language and terminology you've been hearing. Whatever brought you here, I invite you to journey with me as we explore this new territory together.

The idea of nonbinary gender is new to many of us, and it raises a host of questions. What does it mean to be neither

male nor female? What other option is there? And how can you refer to one person with *they/them* pronouns? As a minister, I have heard versions of these questions again and again from people who are genuinely curious but bewildered by the cultural changes around them. In the words of one exasperated person, “I want to be supportive of these young people, but I don’t even understand what they’re talking about!” I understand the sentiment. Even just a few years ago, I knew no one who identified as nonbinary—at least not to my knowledge. Fast-forward to a few years later, and I marvel at how many transgender and nonbinary people are in my life: coworkers, teachers, neighbors, kids at church, and, of course, my own child.

Almost overnight, it seems, the meanings of *male* and *female* have been called into question, and new options for expressing gender have emerged. Gender identities that were once a rarity have become increasingly commonplace. A 2022 study from the Pew Research Center found that 5.1 percent of young people ages 18–29 identify as transgender or nonbinary, a percentage that appears to be increasing with each generation.<sup>2</sup> Their very presence impacts the way their friends and family conceive of gender, raising questions that many of us had never thought to ask before. How are we to make sense of this rapidly changing landscape?

One response, of course, is to double down on the traditional idea of a *gender binary*, which is the belief that there are two unchangeable genders defined at birth. Man or woman. For many of us, this may seem like the obvious reality of the world. When I was growing up, this is something we basically took for granted, and still today, the simplicity of this viewpoint is appealing. Many political figures have been eager to capitalize on this appeal and reaffirm a rigid male-female gender binary, denying and vilifying any variance from it. And yet, if gender is truly binary, why is it that

so many people insist otherwise? Does a simplistic view of gender do justice to the complexity of how people experience gender?

The world is so much bigger than I understood as a child. Over time, I've begun to see that gender is much more nuanced and complicated than I used to think. In other words, I've learned that I still have more to learn. Admittedly, this is hard. It requires rethinking concepts that many of us have always taken for granted. The terminology can feel strange and new, and the end point uncertain. And yet, this also means there is more left for us to discover about the world God has made. This is the pathway that many of us are traveling as we listen to the testimony of our gender-diverse neighbors and reflect anew on our own experiences of gender.

This book is an attempt to introduce and explore the concepts of gender beyond a simple male-female binary. To do so, we return to the familiar words of our tradition that have served as a guide for Christians in every age: the Bible. We begin here not to argue about whether newer conceptions of gender are compatible with Scripture, though we will discover ways in which they are. Rather, we turn to the Bible as a resource. Reading Scripture has helped me to make sense of this changing landscape, and I hope it can do the same for you. Studying the Bible enables us to approach our complex world with nuance and wisdom, framing how we can understand gender in these ways that can otherwise feel unfamiliar.

## An Expanding World

My wife and I often refer to our middle kid as *gender-expansive*, an umbrella term for people whose gender expands beyond the limits of society's gender norms and expectations.

Reflecting back on the past few years, however, I realize that my world was expanding as well. As I met more non-binary and transgender people and heard their stories, I began to recognize how incomplete my perspective had been. Parenting a gender-expansive child launched me on an unanticipated mental journey as I began rethinking my assumptions about the meaning and function of gender.

Over time, I realized that the societal shift we are experiencing is not simply a matter of recognizing a few courageous people who are exceptions to the traditional gender categories. To be sure, honoring their lives and hearing their testimony is vital, but these questions are not only relevant for people who are outside the box. The gender boxes themselves are being questioned, with implications for all of us. Everyone has a relationship to gender categories and a way that we inhabit and perform gender roles and expectations.

In this sense, my hope is that this book can serve as both a window and a mirror. If you are unfamiliar with what it means to be nonbinary or transgender, this book will provide a window into the lives of those who experience gender differently than you do. But it will also hold up a mirror that invites you to consider your own views on gender more clearly. What does it mean to you to be male or female—or something else? How does your perception of your gender shape your life? What might you learn about yourself as you think through these concepts?

In truth, all of us have an experience of our own gender, even if we have always taken it for granted and rarely given it much thought. My family is particularly fortunate to have a gender-expansive child who has drawn our attention to these questions, making us pay attention in a new way. But our story is not unique. Many families—including families in the community where you live—are learning from their gender-expansive family members and wrestling with how to live faithfully and graciously amid



shifting understandings of gender. I share my family's particular experience here not to claim unique expertise over these questions but to share the ways that my experiences as a parent and minister have challenged and expanded my thinking, ultimately enriching my life—and to invite you to travel with me along this path.

Included with each chapter in this book are questions for further reflection and discussion. I hope that these questions can spark fruitful conversations within the context of a faith community. By praying, thinking, and sharing with other people of faith who trust and care for one another, we can be confident that God's Spirit will be at work. This book won't contain all the answers, but in providing a framework for a deeper conversation, it aims to illuminate the questions.

## Into the Unknown

On the first day that our courageous child wore a dress to kindergarten, my wife and I feared the bullying and rejection we imagined would be waiting on the playground. After preparing our child for potentially blunt or hurtful questions from friends, we waited anxiously for the day to end. Walking back from the bus stop that afternoon, our kid reported nonchalantly, "You were wrong. My friend didn't say, 'Why are you wearing a dress?' She said, 'Nice dress.'"

To be fair, not everything has gone so smoothly. Some days have been trickier, and questions still loom over the future. Yet the sky didn't fall. Our kid identifies as non-binary and uses *they/them* pronouns, but their gender is not the defining feature of their identity. They're an ordinary elementary schooler who loves playing soccer, trading Pokémon cards, camping with Cub Scouts, and singing in

the children's choir at church. Their nonbinary gender has been accepted as simply a part of who they are, alongside their love of ice cream and their red hair.

When first contemplating what it would mean to parent a gender-expansive child, my wife and I braced for rejection, criticism, and cruelty in various forms. It is hard to be transgender or nonbinary in our culture, and perhaps even harder in the church, where traditional perspectives can be hard to question. And yet, at the personal level, our interactions with almost everyone have been hearteningly positive. By far, the most common response has been acceptance—mixed with some amount of confusion. I am grateful for both. As a parent, I am grateful for the acceptance that enables my child to thrive and enjoy a happy childhood. But I am also grateful for those who acknowledge their bewilderment at this new reality and nevertheless hold an open mind. Confusion can be the doorway to exploring deeper questions and growing beyond the limitations of our initial assumptions.

For all those willing to embrace the uncertainty and explore our world in its fullness, this book is for you. If you find yourself wondering, questioning, and trying to make sense of this complex landscape, I invite you to take this journey with me. Together, let's explore how our faith helps us understand the shifting meaning of gender in a changing world.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What are your reactions to this book so far?
2. Are there terms or concepts introduced in this chapter that have raised new questions for you?
3. The author describes his experience as the parent of a nonbinary child. What experiences shape the way

you understand gender? Which parts of this discussion are less familiar to you?

4. As you begin this book, what questions do you bring with you? Which aspects of gender are you curious to learn more about? Have you heard people in society describe gender in ways you didn't understand or agree with?
5. When these topics are discussed as a faith community, what positive outcomes do you hope may come from the conversation? What anxieties does this discussion raise?

## ETERNAL TRUTH IN A CHANGING WORLD

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Can faithful Christians understand  
gender in new ways?

*I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.*

—John 16:12–13

There's an old riddle I remember learning when I was a kid. Perhaps you've heard it. A father and son are in a car accident and are taken to the hospital, where both are rushed into surgery. The father's surgery begins right away, but when the little boy arrives in the operating room, the surgeon says, "I can't operate on this child. He is my son." How can this be?

The answer, of course, is that the surgeon is the boy's mother. Surprise! OK, this isn't the toughest riddle in the world. It relies on the listener's assumption that doctors are men, and a few decades ago, this was fairly effective. If the boy's father was in the accident, how could he also be performing surgery? I find it interesting that this riddle doesn't

work as well as it used to. When I posed this challenging problem to my kids, they looked back blankly, wondering where the riddle was. Perhaps because most of the pediatricians who have treated them are women, they immediately gathered that the surgeon was the boy's mother—or that the surgeon was the boy's other father, a solution that would have been even more surprising when I was a child. Times have changed.

In the news today, debates over the treatment of transgender and nonbinary people dominate the headlines, and it's true that a lot of change has happened quickly. Many of us are unsure how to make sense of it. And yet, while it is true that many of these questions are taking on new forms, it is also true that societal perspectives on gender and gender roles have been changing for many years. As we think about whether and how Christians might incorporate contemporary ideas about nonbinary gender, perhaps it helps to start by remembering how our ideas of gender have already begun to shift.

## A Changing Attitude toward Gender

When I recently took my kids to the elementary school open house to meet their teachers, I marveled at how much has changed since I was a student. Gone are the rows of desks with the carved-out slot for a pencil across the top. The classrooms appear noticeably different. And so do the people. I noticed that some of the girls cut their hair short, while some boys grow theirs long. I noticed the painted fingernails on one of the dads who walked by with his wife and kids. None of these folks were transgender, at least as far as I know; they simply dress and present themselves differently than students in my elementary school would have.

The expectations for *gender expression* — how a person presents their gender externally — have shifted.

As we grow up, we inevitably internalize certain ideas about gender. We learn from our culture how men and women are supposed to dress and act, ideas that are hard to shake. If I ask you to picture a firefighter talking to a kindergarten teacher, I suspect that your brain automatically assigns a gender to each person. Although we know that women can be firefighters and men can teach kindergarten, our brains involuntarily make associations between gender and certain ways of being in the world. This is simply how our brains work, using shortcuts to navigate a complex world.

These mental associations stick with us, even when our conscious perspective acknowledges that a shift has taken place. Part of our brain activates when it sees something that contradicts its expectations — like a little boy with painted fingernails. As society's gender expectations continue to shift, a gulf emerges between these newer, more flexible expectations and the stricter rules that many of us internalized years ago. How do we respond to this widening gulf?

I've heard people describe these changes in completely opposite ways. For some, this has been a liberating breath of fresh air. Thanks to our culture's evolving norms for gender expression, people now can dress, look, and act however they like, no longer cramming themselves into a restrictive box that doesn't fit. Others, however, worry that these changes have gone too far, too fast. They feel society's values are eroding and an overly permissive culture has destabilized what should be clear and simple: Boys are boys, and girls are girls. They consider the changes of this moment a moral decline, not a matter of stylistic preference. Given these opposing perspectives on societal changes, then, how do we determine the faithful way forward? How do we discern timeless truth in the midst of a changing world?

## What Deuteronomy Says about the Clothes We Wear

For many Christians, the obvious place to turn is the Bible. By grounding ourselves in its ancient words, we seek a perspective wider than the limits of our particular moment. Studying how people of faith faced the challenges of their day, we gain practical insight for our own modern questions. The Bible's timeless words prove timely. Of course, we won't find contemporary situations spelled out exactly, but we can ask what the Bible says about how men and women are supposed to dress and present themselves. What does the Bible teach us about the shifts we are experiencing?

The verse that most explicitly addresses this subject is Deuteronomy 22:5, which states, "A woman shall not wear a man's apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment, for whoever does such things is abhorrent to the LORD your God." Some find in this verse a clear commandment for traditional gender expression. Men should dress like men, and women should dress like women. Simple. It's certainly possible to claim this verse as an argument for a stricter perspective on gender norms. The more we think about the verse, however, the more complicated it becomes.

The challenge is that this verse doesn't define its terms: What *are* men's clothes and women's clothes? The commandment clearly states that people are supposed to wear the clothes appropriate to their gender, but it gives no guidance about how those designations are made. Who decides which clothes are for men and which are for women? Most likely, when this verse was written it was simply taken for granted that everyone knew which clothes were which. With the benefit of hindsight, however, we recognize that these designations are not universal. We certainly don't wear the same clothes that are presupposed in this verse—imagine wearing your vacation Bible school costume to work!

Clothing styles differ drastically across cultures and time periods.

For example, is there an inherent reason girls wear dresses and boys generally do not? It's a clear norm in American culture, but this isn't universal. Men in ancient Rome wore togas, and men in Scotland sometimes wear kilts. But if a seventh-grade boy in the US wears a similar skirt to school, it makes a very different statement. Moreover, even within the United States, these norms have evolved. Looking at old black-and-white portraits from a few generations ago, we find little boys wearing what look like dresses. It might seem an odd fashion choice today, but at the time, this was perfectly natural — this was a boy wearing boys' clothes.

It's kind of strange when you think about it. If you walk through a Target or Old Navy, the aisles clearly denote gender. And yet, what is it about specific colors, fabrics, and patterns that make them appropriate for the section labeled "boys" or "girls"? We just kind of know. Sometimes, these perceptions are intentionally influenced. Clothing designers add gender-specific features to clothes so that they are harder to pass down between siblings. Marketing departments reinforce gender differences for the sake of selling more products. In all sorts of ways, our culture teaches us which clothes are appropriate for our gender, lessons that we internalize without even realizing it. The fact that Deuteronomy 22:5 doesn't define male and female clothing styles suggests to me that this has always been the case: Their culture also taught them which clothing styles were appropriate for which gender, expectations they came to take for granted.

What does this mean for us, then? We certainly don't wear the clothes that the ancient Israelites wore, but we do understand which clothes our culture assigns to men and women today. One logical application of the verse is to say



that we should follow the rules that our culture teaches. If we take that route, however, we run into a problem when our culture's definitions begin to change. After all, these norms do change over time. Certainly, they have changed from ancient Israel to today, but they have also changed in our lifetimes. Many of us remember a time when it was scandalous for a woman to wear pants to church instead of a dress, but those rules have changed. We're still able to follow Deuteronomy 22:5, just with a different understanding of how its terms are defined. Pants are no longer strictly "a man's apparel"; they are also now "a woman's garment."

We've made these shifts across cultures and across the centuries, while still holding onto the core of the verse. But how do we do this with the shifts happening now? If our culture teaches us that anyone can wear whatever they like—that there are no such things as men's clothes and women's clothes—then where does that leave us?

## Which Verses Apply to Us?

This brings us to a deeper question about applying a commandment like Deuteronomy 22:5 to our lives: *Are we supposed to?* Even if we find a way to translate its ancient definitions of clothing into our present time, does this commandment apply to modern Christian readers or only to ancient Israel? After all, Deuteronomy contains many commandments that Christians feel no obligation to follow. The same chapter forbids wearing clothing made of two fabrics or planting two kinds of seeds in the same farmland. It prescribes the death penalty for adultery. Clearly, we do not follow all these laws. Christians are not bound by the dietary laws and purity restrictions of the Old Testament. Why would one verse about clothing be the exception?

On the other hand, we do follow some of the moral

commandments in the Old Testament, such as prohibitions against murder or theft. We wouldn't toss out the Ten Commandments as old-fashioned. How, then, do we know which commandments should be considered enduring moral truths? Nothing in the text suggests that prohibitions on eating pork and shellfish, for instance, were merely dietary rather than moral issues. The Law was the Law. Few Christians, however, find it immoral to eat those foods. Since the text itself does not indicate which laws reveal moral truths that are eternally relevant, it remains a matter of discernment for us to say whether a particular commandment reveals deep truths that apply to us today. The challenge of a verse like Deuteronomy 22:5 is that different readers come to different conclusions. Some hear the verse as God's endorsement of rigid gender norms as part of living a moral life, while others understand the verse as part of the Law that is no longer necessary for Christians to follow, like the other verses in the chapter.

One way we try to resolve this challenge is by reading these commandments alongside the rest of Scripture. We examine whether this is an enduring theme, such as caring for your neighbors, or guidance related to that particular moment in history, such as instruction for how the tabernacle was to be transported. What does the rest of the Bible say about men's and women's style of dress? As in the Old Testament, gender expression is not a topic that arises frequently in the New Testament. However, 1 Corinthians 11 does address questions of appearance for men and women: "Does not nature itself teach you that, if a man wears long hair, it is dishonoring to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering" (vv. 14–15). As with the verse from Deuteronomy, we have a passage that seems to support traditional gender expression: short hair for men and longer hair for women. This instruction seems pretty easy to apply to our context.

And yet, earlier in this chapter, Paul instructs women to wear veils over their heads when they pray. Few of us would say this applies to Christians today. We recognize that Paul wrote his letters to particular congregations with their specific concerns in mind. Some of his teachings, like this instruction to wear veils or his directive elsewhere for women not to wear jewelry, were written for the specific recipients of his letter. I've never been in a church that viewed these as universal commands for all people in all times. Is this also the case with Paul's words about long and short hair? How do we know which words apply to us today?

## Not in the Bible

Discerning how to interpret the Bible isn't easy. When we hold its ancient words next to our modern society, we are quickly confronted by how drastically our world has changed. This in no way means the Bible is irrelevant. What it means is that we have work to do here; the Bible isn't going to provide simplistic answers to our complicated questions. As we have just seen, this is even the case when the questions are relatively straightforward: Which clothing and hairstyles are appropriate for men and women? The Bible has only a few verses that address this topic, and the application to a modern context isn't entirely clear.

This gulf is even more prominent when we broaden our focus to the larger questions being asked today about the experience of transgender and nonbinary people. These are subjects that our ancient texts do not have specific language to describe. We simply cannot consult a particular verse that details for us what to think about nonbinary gender. No biblical figures are explicitly portrayed as transgender in the way that we understand this concept today. Asking questions about the nature of gender itself, we are challenged

by the reality that modern expressions of gender diversity aren't explained in the Bible. Does this mean that it is unbiblical for a person to be transgender or nonbinary?

Well, it depends on what we mean by "unbiblical." Many aspects of modern life are not mentioned in the Bible: pizza, socks, airplanes, and Antarctica, to name a few. These are unbiblical in the sense of being absent from the text of Scripture, but this doesn't mean they are morally wrong and counter to the Bible's message. They are not antibiblical; they were simply not part of the known world yet. In the centuries since the Bible was written, human beings have learned that the earth is round, that germs cause disease, and that electricity can power lights; ancient people lacked this understanding of the world. Likewise, scientific discoveries have deepened our knowledge of ourselves, such as the role of neurotransmitters in determining mental health. Such discoveries do not invalidate the lessons of the Bible. Rather, they expand our awareness of God's creation, including our human minds. Our understanding of the world adapts as our knowledge grows. This process, however, is not without controversy. In fact, the collision between biblical interpretation and changing perceptions of the world can be explosive. Consider, for instance, the case of Galileo.

## Rethinking Common Sense

Famously, Galileo came into conflict with the church when his scientific research brushed against established church doctrine. Like Copernicus before him, Galileo believed that the earth revolved around the sun. This may seem unremarkable to us, but at the time, nearly everyone thought of the earth as the center of the universe, including most scientists. They also believed the Bible was on their side, citing a

passage in Joshua where God commands the sun to stand still, seeming to imply that the sun is moving around the earth. Galileo disagreed.

Because Galileo's beliefs were seen as heretical, he was tried and sentenced to house arrest for the remainder of his life. Galileo insisted that his views on astronomy were not heretical. They were simply the truth. And if this is the truth, it must not contradict Scripture. In his writings, he states that he is not arguing against the Bible. Rather, he is arguing against his opponents' misunderstanding of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> He goes to great lengths to show how Joshua 10:12–13 can be understood from his perspective, arguing that the verse actually makes even more sense when we understand correctly that the earth revolves around the sun.

Imagine how it would have felt to hear Copernicus and Galileo's bizarre new theories. For those who had always understood the earth as the center of the universe, these novel ideas went against common sense. Anyone could see that the sun rises and falls, while the earth remains still. The idea of the earth rotating on its axis while also revolving around the sun would have seemed strange and unnatural. Indeed, many faith leaders stridently insisted that such ideas were ridiculous and incompatible with the faith. Eventually, however, Galileo's position became the accepted view — his novel ideas became our common sense. Few of us today see any contradiction with the teachings of Scripture. We have simply incorporated this new scientific knowledge into our understanding of the world. We acknowledge that ancient people lacked our understanding of astronomy, but this does not compel us to choose between the Bible and astronomy. We can hold them both.

Again and again throughout history, Christians have wrestled with the changing world around them, trying to decide when to resist new ideas and when to integrate them into their understanding of faith. Galileo lived through such

a time. So did Christians trying to understand whether the world was flat or round, or whether mental illness was caused by neurotransmitters instead of demon possession, or whether evolution was part of how God created the world. We are living through another such time today. As our society navigates new and shifting understandings of gender, we wrestle with the same difficult questions as those who came before us: Which ideas do we resist, and which do we incorporate into our understanding of the world?

## Listening to the Spirit

This is not an easy task. There will be voices among us insisting that new ideas about gender are incompatible with the Christian faith. After all, these ideas are not delineated in the Bible. If the Bible (supposedly) portrays a world with a neat binary of male and female, do we dare to view the world in a way our spiritual ancestors did not?

But there will also be voices among us who follow in the mold of Galileo, people who observe the evidence before them and incorporate it into their faith, even when this requires thinking in new ways. Such a task is daunting, but it is also marked with hope and possibility. It means we are not forced to choose one option or the other. Despite what the more strident voices in the debate may say, accepting that people can be nonbinary or transgender does not mean you have to reject the Bible. You don't have to abandon your Christian faith to affirm and support the gender-expansive people in your life. Yes, you may have to think hard and pray and talk with others about the way you've been interpreting the Bible. But we do this by leaning into the Bible, not turning away from it.

And so, in the chapters that follow in this book, we will keep returning to the Bible, holding its words in

conversation with the ideas about gender that are emerging in contemporary society. We do this not because the Bible will give us a simple answer, but because the Bible is our guide through this new terrain, helping us wrestle faithfully with the questions before us. We read the Bible to listen well to the diverse ancient voices that continue to enrich our conversations about gender. We read together, listening for God's Spirit to lead us through unfamiliar territory—just as it always has.

When Jesus was preparing his disciples for his death, he reassured them that the Spirit would continue to lead them. They would continue to grow and learn in ways that they were not yet ready to understand. I take heart that our story isn't over yet. It can be unsettling to rethink long-held beliefs, but it can also be an act of deep faith, believing that God's Spirit remains actively at work in our midst. As we begin this journey together, may we find hope in the words of reassurance that Jesus offered to his disciples in John 16:12–13: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come." May we listen well together.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. The author observes that the "rules" for how boys and girls dress and act have been changing over the years. Whether at school, in church, or in popular culture, what changes have you noticed in your lifetime? How do you feel about these changes?
2. Do you seek to obey Deuteronomy 22's laws about not planting two types of crops in the same field or

not wearing clothes made of two types of fabric? How about the commandment not to murder (Deut. 5:17)? Reading the various laws in the Old Testament, how do you discern which guidance still applies to Christians today? What do you make of a verse like Deuteronomy 22:5?

3. Since Paul's letters were written to specific communities, we know that sometimes his instruction was for a particular context, yet his words continue to guide the church more broadly. How do you gain insights from his letters and apply them to your life and your church? What do his words in 1 Corinthians 11 mean for you?
4. Humanity has learned many things since the Bible was written, such as how to use electricity, how the human brain works, and the way germs cause disease, to name a few. Yet new discoveries can also feel threatening to existing beliefs. Why is it important that the church be cautious about adopting new ideas too quickly? On the other hand, when is it problematic to resist the evidence of new knowledge before us?
5. If you had been alive when Galileo's discoveries challenged long-held beliefs, how do you think you would have reacted? Are there lessons we can learn from this episode in history? How do we want to respond to new ideas today?
6. Today, faithful Christians hold different perspectives about gender. How do you hope your church will navigate the questions we face? How can we have productive and generous conversations that are respectful of one another?